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# The Phonics Screening Check 2012-2017: An independent enquiry into the views of Head Teachers, teachers and parents

**Final Report September 2018**

**Edited by**

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NEWMAN UNIVERSITY

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## Preface

Since 2006 I have published a series of articles on literacy, in particular, the teaching of early literacy. I have put under the searchlight the evidence base for current literacy policy in England and justification for its claimed success in raising literacy levels. These publications were brought together in my book *Learning to be Literate: Insights from research for policy and practice* (Clark, 2014 Part IV). This was updated in a revised edition in 2016.

On learning that the Federal Government in Australia was considering following England's lead and making synthetic phonics the required method of teaching reading and importing the Phonics Screening Check from England I published two edited books, one in 2017, the other in 2018, with relevant evidence from seventeen literacy researchers. *Reading the Evidence: Synthetic phonics and literacy learning* (Clark, 2017) and *Teaching Initial Literacy: Policy, evidence and ideology* (Clark, 2018) have contributions from UK, USA, Australia, The Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. It should be clear that these academics, and indeed many others, are not as has been claimed, opposed to phonics, all accepting that it has a place in the teaching of reading. What they challenge is that there is evidence that the *only* method of teaching reading to all children should be by synthetic phonics. They also present evidence challenging many of the claims for the Phonics Screening Check, a statutory assessment for all children in England around six years of age since 2012.

The government in England has neither involved the teaching profession in the development or implementation of what is now a high stakes statutory assessment and mandatory way of teaching reading in all state schools (see Appendix I). Schools are judged by DfE and Ofsted by the percentage pass on the check with a requirement to increase the percentage pass each year. Universities involved in teacher education are required to present this method as the method of teaching reading. There seems no opportunity for academics to challenge this policy in their teaching, in dialogue with DfE, or even with other academics. Furthermore, the funds allocated by DfE since 2012 for literacy courses and materials, which have been substantial, are with synthetic phonics at their heart (See Appendix II).

There is little evidence that the views of teachers or parents as to the effects of the check, intended and unintended, on the literacy experiences of young children in England have been sought by the government since the early research funded shortly after it was introduced (see chapter 16 in Clark, 2016). Yet already at that time concerns were expressed on its effects on classroom practice. The silence of teachers and of many academics may be assumed to indicate that they are in support of the policy, or are unconcerned.

The aim of this independent survey, preliminary results of which we reported in July 2018, was to explore the views of teachers who have been involved in administering the check and parents whose children have been assessed. The response to this survey has shown that their relative silence until now should not be taken as evidence that they are uninterested or unconcerned. Not only did busy professionals and parents complete the survey but many took time to add comments. The survey was independent and anonymous, but we have been contacted by a number of those who completed the survey who have expressed interest to be involved in further research or to provide further information. Here we present our final report following more complex analyses of the data over the last few months. Our findings have valuable messages for policymakers. We acknowledge the limitations of such a survey and appreciate that though there were advantages in an anonymous survey there are dangers. We appreciate that to view the

questions it was necessary to open the links and some of the incomplete forms may be from people who merely wanted to see the content of the survey. However, we decided we should retain all forms submitted rather than face criticism for making what might be claimed to be an arbitrary decision to delete some. It may be seen from the tables how many of each sample replied to each question and how many skipped questions (see Appendices V, VI and VII). In our more complex analysis we are now able to relate responses to the characteristics of those who answered. Care was taken to frame the questions so that they were not leading questions and advice was sought from a number of experienced literacy researchers. We stressed in the notice about the survey that this was an independent survey and that we encouraged those in support of current government policy to complete the survey as well as those with concerns.

This survey is not a funded research project and has not received grants. Associations we approached were merely asked to publicise the notice and encourage members to complete the survey. In addition, we advertised it as widely as possible and do appear to have reached teachers and parents from all regions in England.

The Final Report can be read online and downloaded from

<https://newman.ac.uk/knowledge-base/the-phonics-screening-check-2012-2017>

Margaret M Clark September 2018

## Editors and Contributors

Margaret M Clark OBE is a Visiting Professor at Newman University and Emeritus Professor at the University of Birmingham. She was awarded a DLitt for her first published books on literacy, a community study of children with reading difficulties and a research into young fluent readers. The Scottish Council for Research in Education awarded her a Fellowship for her distinguished contribution to educational research. She was personally commissioned by the Secretary of State for Education to evaluate research of relevance to the education of children under five. Her book *Learning to be Literate: Insights from research for policy and practice* won the UKLA Academic Book Award in 2015 and an updated revised edition was published by Routledge in 2016. Her two most recent books in 2017 and 2018 on the teaching of early literacy have contributions from UK, USA, Australia, The Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. In 2017 she was elected to the Reading Hall of Fame.

Jonathan Glazzard is Professor of Teacher Education in the Carnegie School of Education at Leeds Beckett University. His research areas include inclusive education, special educational needs and or disability in schools and early reading development in children. He has published papers on specific areas including autism, dyslexia and speech and language and communication needs. He has also authored several books to support trainee teachers. Jonathan is interested in research which improves educational outcomes for marginalised learners and in giving voice to children and young people who have experienced discrimination in schools.

Susan Atkinson is a Senior Lecturer in the Carnegie School of Education at Leeds Beckett University. She is a chartered psychologist, with research interests in inclusion, cognitive development, working memory development, working memory and reading, and factors affecting attainment in primary school.

John Bayley is a former primary school Head Teacher and is now a Senior Lecturer in the School of Educational Studies at Newman University.

Sue Reid is a Senior Lecturer in Initial Teacher Education at Newman University with a specialism in English. She has experience as a teacher throughout the key stages, also in early years. She has worked as a National Strategies literacy consultant and trained many teachers in the implementation of systematic synthetic phonics before taking up her current role as a teacher educator.

## **Acknowledgements**

We are grateful to all those who have given advice on the framing of the questions, to those who circulated the information about the survey, and not least to those who took the time to complete the survey.

We are particularly indebted to Bob Ridge-Stearn Head of ELearning at Newman University who transformed our draft questionnaire into survey monkey format which made not only for ease of completion but also provides a preliminary analysis. We are also grateful to Newman University for allowing us to distribute the preliminary report and this final report through the Newman website in a way that makes it widely available quickly, and in a form able to be downloaded. Our thanks to the Marketing Department at Newman University for their assistance in preparing this version for the website and to colleagues who have proof read the report.

Our thanks to Professor Misty Adoniou of the University of Canberra for contributing Appendix III in which she outlines the current position in Australia with regard to the Phonics Screening Check.

## **Outline and summary of the report on an independent enquiry into the views of Head Teachers, teachers and parents on the Phonics Screening Check**

The preliminary report of this survey was published online on 6 July 2018. This has now been replaced by the final report: *The Phonics Screening Check 2012-2017: An independent enquiry into the views of Head Teachers, teachers and parents. Final Report September 2018*. Editors Margaret M. Clark OBE, Newman University and Jonathan Glazzard, Leeds Beckett University. This can be accessed and downloaded from: <https://newman.ac.uk/knowledge-base/the-phonics-screening-check-2012-2017>.

In addition to Margaret M. Clark and Jonathan Glazzard the other members of the research team are Susan Atkinson of Leeds Beckett University, and John Bayley and Sue Reid of Newman University.

### **Outline**

This was an independent survey and the results are anonymous. The aim of the survey was to enable government policy to be informed by the views of teachers and parents as to the effect of current policy on the literacy experiences of young children in primary schools in England. It was advertised nationally in England during May 2018 with links to the three survey forms, for Head Teachers who worked in schools with Year 1 classes, teachers who had assessed children, and parents whose children had been assessed on the check. Where a parent had more than one child assessed they were asked to complete the survey for the child assessed most recently.

Survey forms were returned by 230 Head Teachers, 1,348 teachers and 419 parents. While not all questions were answered by all respondents, any percentages quoted here are based on responses by at least 180 Head Teachers, 1,108 teachers and 295 parents. We had responses from all regions of England and from teachers with a wide range of experience. Most of the teachers had assessed at least 40 children on the check and 56% of the Head Teachers had themselves assessed children on the check. Unfortunately, in spite of our attempts, the responses from parents were nearly all from parents whose mother tongue is English. However, many of those parents who did respond expressed concern at the effect of the check on the literacy experiences of their children., including those whose child had passed the check.

Since 6 July, when we released our preliminary report, we have studied several other researches which reveal further evidence on the effect of current policy on children's literacy experiences, as reported by their teachers, now also by children. In our final report these findings are summarised in a new chapter 2. The findings of our survey are reported in chapters 4 to 7 and the questions and answers in Appendices V to VII. We have added to the appendices a summary of the additional data from the more complex analyses we have now undertaken. Appendix I reveals evidence that teachers have not been consulted on the future of the check. In Appendix II we indicate how much money has been spent by DfE on the check, on commercial synthetic phonics materials and training courses. We know from our survey that many primary schools have also devoted funds to commercial materials to ensure they raise their percentage pass on the check, but there is no evidence as to how much. Appendix III reports on recent developments in Australia where it appears the Phonics Screening Check may soon be introduced in some states. In chapter 3 details of the survey are reported and Appendix IV shows the information on the survey that was circulated.

### **Summary of the views of Head Teachers and teachers (see chapters 4, 5 and Appendices V and VI)**

The percentages of Head Teachers and teachers who answered these key questions are based on at least 180 Head Teachers and 1108 teachers, those who answered these policy related questions.

1. *Do you think the phonics check provides you with information on individual children which you did not already have?* No HT 89% T 94%.
2. *Do you think pass/fail should be recorded for the check?* No HT 71% T 75%.



3. *Is it useful to re-test children in Year 2 who fail the check in Year 1?* No HT 64% T 74% *Do you think it is useful to have pseudo/alien words in the check?* No HT 80% T 80%.
4. *Do you buy commercial synthetic phonics materials or training for your school?* HT Yes 46% (62 made comments). 48% of teachers used commercial materials and 215 made comments.
5. *Do you think the phonics check should remain statutory?* Yes HT 16% T 12% NB There were significant differences between the views of more and less experienced teachers (see Appendices).
6. *To what extent do you agree with the government policy that the method of teaching reading in England to all children should be by synthetic phonics only?* Agree HT 6% T 10% Disagree HT 62% (73 comments) T 47% (429 comments). There were significant differences with more experienced teachers more likely not to agree.

#### **Summary of views of parents (mainly based on 304 parents, see chapter 6 and Appendix VII)**

1. Many of the parents had more than one child assessed.
2. Nearly half the parents who responded had a child assessed in 2017 by which time the percentage pass was high.
3. The check was passed by 75% of these children.
4. Eighty percent of the parents stated that their child had passed the check.
5. Of the parents who responded 80% stated that their child could already read with understanding when they sat the check and 85% that their child could already write recognisable words.
6. Many parents made comments in response to the questions, many expressing concern at the effect of the check, including those whose child had passed the check see chapter 6 and Appendix VII).

Many of these parents whose child was reading well at the time of the check or who passed the check still expressed negative attitudes to the check and the government policy. It would be valuable to have the views of a wider range of parents whose children have sat the check, including children who have speech, language and communication needs or other special educational needs and children who are new to English.

#### **Implications**

1. The views expressed by the teachers indicate that the government should seriously consider either discontinuing the check or at least making it voluntary.
2. \*Most teachers do not agree with the pass/fail scoring on the check or the requirement that children who fail should re-sit the check.
3. \*Most teachers (and many parents) do not agree with the inclusion of pseudo/ alien words in the check. This is apparent not only in their answers but also in their comments where they gave their reasons.
4. \*The responses to this survey by the teachers and parents, in their answers and in the comments made to the key questions, suggests a degree of concern about current government literacy policy of which the government should now be aware.
5. \*Concern was expressed both about the high stakes pass/fail Phonics Screening Check and the current mandatory requirement in England that synthetic phonics should be the only method of teaching reading to all children.

\*Many Head Teachers and teachers expressed negative views on both the check and current government policy. There was a significant difference when teachers were grouped by length of service with a higher percentage of the more experienced teachers likely to express negative views. Many recently qualified teachers in England may not have been alerted to the controversial nature of some of the evidence cited by the government as Teacher Education programmes may be dominated by a focus on synthetic phonics to enable them to meet Ofsted requirements (see chapter 2). This is an area for further research.

## Chapter 1 Who determines literacy policies in England and on what evidence?

Margaret M. Clark

### Background

Government literacy policy on learning to read in England since 2006 appears to have its origins in the Rose Report, *The Independent Review of the Teaching of Early Reading* (Rose, 2006). A critique of the report is to be found in chapter 13 of *Learning to be Literate: Insights from research for policy and practice* (Clark, 2016) with further evaluation in chapter 7 by Clark and chapter 8 by Greg Brooks in *Reading the Evidence: Synthetic phonics and literacy learning* (Clark, 2017a). Since 2006 my aim has been to present a balanced picture of the evidence concerning the government's mandatory policy in England that *the* method of teaching reading should be by synthetic phonics only, and since 2012 that the Phonics Screening Check be a statutory assessment taken by all children in state primary schools at the end of Year 1, when about six years of age. The check has 40 words (20 real and 20 pseudo words) which the child is required to read out loud to the teacher. Those who fail to achieve a mark of 32 out of 40, the pass mark, are required to re-sit the check the following year. What had initially been claimed as a light touch diagnostic check has become a high stakes assessment with schools expected to raise their percentage pass year on year. The results are scrutinised both by the government and by Ofsted. The increase in the percentage pass on the check is being claimed to show that more children each year are, thanks to this policy, on their way to becoming fluent readers. In a series of articles, I analysed these developments, summarising them in Part IV of *Learning to be Literate: insights from research for policy and practice* (Clark, 2014), updating this evidence in a revised edition of the book in 2016. The School Standards Minister Nick Gibb, who has been committed to this policy since 2005, recommended to the Federal Government in Australia that it should, on the basis of its success in England, adopt synthetic phonics as the method of teaching reading and introduce the Phonics Screening Check into Australia (See Appendix III).

I felt that a balanced picture of the evidence from England was not being presented in Australia. In two edited books in 2017 and 2018 I presented evidence from seventeen academics in the United Kingdom, Australia, The United States, The Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. The latter two countries, with very different literacy policies, and with teachers involved in their development and implementation, ranked statistically higher than England in the recently reported findings of PIRLS 2016 (Clark, 2018).

The School Standards Minister for England Nick Gibb, immediately on publication of the PIRLS 2016 results in December 2017 made a speech at the British Library where he claimed not only that England's improvement in ranking on this assessment of ten-year-olds was the result of the phonics policy but also that children's potential had previously been stunted, not by their teachers but because of 'a dogmatic romanticism that prevented the spread of evidence-based teaching practices'. This he followed with a sweeping indictment:

- despite the evidence in favour of phonics – we faced opposition from various lobby groups: those opposed to testing, those professors of education who had built a career on teaching teachers to use the 'look and say' approach, and the teaching unions.  
(Gibb, 2017)

He further stated that his case for synthetic phonics as the method for teaching reading is 'not an un-evidenced assertion' and is one 'backed up by decades of research' Unfortunately the research he still chooses to quote is that in Clackmannanshire in Scotland whose methodology has been heavily criticised by many researchers (see chapter 14 in Clark, 2016 and chapter 2 by Glazzard, 2018). The School Standards Minister continues this theme in his recent speeches.

Those who read *Reading the Evidence: Synthetic phonics and literacy learning* (Clark, 2017a) dispassionately checking for evidence, would have found extensive research to challenge the claim that prior to recent government policy, phonics was not evident in classrooms in England and in The United States, where similar claims were made in 1990s, or indeed recently in Australia. That book contains a collection of papers by five literacy experts from the United Kingdom and Australia showing that phonics did already have a place in classroom practice. In *Reading the Evidence*, we included in the appendices, statements made by UKLA in 2014 in The United Kingdom, and a joint statement by ALEA and PETAA in Australia in 2016, both backed by extensive references (Clark, 2017a). Shortly after the publication of *Reading the Evidence*, the results of PIRLS the Progress in International Reading Study 2016, were released in December 2017. Critics claimed the results invalidated our claims in that book, as England's ranking had risen in this latest assessment of literacy of ten-year-olds when compared with the previous assessment in 2011, rising from joint 10th to joint 8th. This improved ranking, according Nick Gibb, was caused by current policy and the phonics check which these children were the first to sit. Such claims are considered in a more recent book, *Teaching Initial Literacy: Policy, evidence and ideology* with contributions from a further twelve academics (Clark, 2018). Cautions are sounded in the report on PIRLS in drawing causal connections from this single set of data. It is also pointed out that not all countries that have an emphasis on phonics rank high. Both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland rank statistically higher than England on PIRLS yet no attention has been drawn in England to what we might learn from these literacy policies which differ greatly from that in England. Readers are referred to these two edited books for evidence on the development of and effects, intended and unintended of the Phonics Screening Check on the literacy experiences of young children in England. The only place so far where children's voices have been reported is on pages 92-93 of Clark 2017a with quotations from the research of Jane Carter. Her research also included interviews of teachers as to their views of the check. Published evidence from that impressive study should soon be available. However, with her permission, I summarise her findings on the children's and teachers' voices here (see chapter 2).

Evidence on the views of teachers on the Phonics Screening Check is to be found in the government funded research by the National Foundation for Educational Research. This was, however, published in 2015 and covers only the early years of the check before it became such a high stakes assessment as it has now become. Even then teachers reported it was having effects on the classroom literacy experiences of young children, some of which concerned them (see chapter 16 of Clark, 2016, chapter 9 in Clark, 2017a and chapter 2 in this report). Government appears to have ignored the findings of this research although it was commissioned by DfE. In 2017 the government launched a consultation on assessment in primary schools in England in which reference is made to the Phonics Screening Check as a statutory assessment for children at the end of Year 1. There are questions on the future of other assessments, yet no questions as to the future of the phonics check, whether it should remain, and if so as a statutory assessment. I now have evidence that this omission was no accident, as may be seen from the answer I received when I raised this issue at the Westminster Forum on December 7, 2017 following a presentation on the consultation (see Appendix I).

### **The place of phonics testing in primary schools: the government consultation on assessment in primary schools in England**

Below are extracts from an article in the *Education Journal* 2017 306: 12-14 summarising the evidence I was submitting to the DfE consultation (*Primary Assessment in England: Government consultation*. Launch 30 March 2017. Standards and Testing Agency. Reference STA/17/7935/e ISBN 978-1-78644-438-7). The DfE issued this consultation document on Primary Assessment in March 2017, with the 22 June as the closing date for responses. I considered the justification for the Phonics Screening Check remaining a statutory assessment in primary schools and the claim that synthetic phonics is *the* way to teach reading, as repeatedly claimed by the School Standards Minister Nick Gibb.

On page 10 of the consultation document reference is made to the phonics screening test as:

A light-touch, statutory screening check administered by teachers. The check assesses a pupil's phonics decoding ability to identify pupils needing additional support...Pupils who do not meet the required standard are required to re-sit in year 2.

Twenty questions are posed in the consultation document to which one is asked to respond. To my surprise, no questions are raised as to the future of the Phonics Screening Check, whether it should remain, and if so, as a statutory assessment. Following the consultation, it was possible that the only other assessments remaining in Year 1 might be teacher assessments. Thus, the screening check, whose reliability, validity and effect on the curriculum were not even being scrutinised, was likely to remain a statutory assessment. This pass/fail check with percentage pass within each school recorded each year, and an expectation of an increase in percentage pass each year, is far from being a light-touch diagnostic assessment as claimed. Disturbingly, it could become an even higher stakes measurement, with percentage pass an important aspect in school accountability as measured by Ofsted and the government.

No evidence-based criticisms of the status accorded by the government to synthetic phonics as the method of teaching reading, or of the success of the screening test as having raised standards in anything other than the test itself had so far dented the School Standards Minister Nick Gibb's faith in the policy. In the Conservative Manifesto only a few pages were devoted to primary education, yet, on page 51 reference was made to two key aspects of government policy for primary education:

We will build on the success of the phonics screening test.

We will expect every 11-year-old to know their times tables off by heart.

This government that claims its policy is evidence-based offers a depressing future for young children in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in primary school in England, as in their early years they will be expected to practise pseudo words, recite their tables and learn grammatical terms! Sadly, many of the youngest children will also have been recorded by the age of six as having failed the phonics check.

The following are important points to which I drew attention in Clark, 2017b:

- i) The large difference in pass rate each year between the oldest and youngest children; thus, many of the youngest children, particularly boys, are labelled failures early in their school career.
- ii) Not only are half the words in the phonics check pseudo words, but each year the first twelve words in the check have been pseudo words. Some of those confused by the pseudo words have been children who could already read, or children who have attempted to make these into real words. There are children, including some autistic children, who refused to attempt pseudo words, but read all the real words correctly, thus failing the check. The instructions for the check are ambiguous meaning that some teachers might stop the check without giving children who fail on pseudo words the opportunity to try the real words.

### **Recent developments in the phonics policy in England**

The dictates from DfE and Ofsted on the place of synthetic phonics and the importance for schools of a high and increasing percentage pass on the phonics check were, I felt having a major impact on practice in schools, and institutions training teachers in England, removing the freedom of practitioners to adopt the approaches they think appropriate for their individual children. Yet the government remains

committed to expenditure on further synthetic phonics initiatives, even funding a pilot study in 300 schools to consider

whether the check should be repeated in Year 3 by those children who failed the phonics check in Year 2. The report of this study by NFER was not published but in a written answer Nick Gibb, School Standards Minister stated this policy would not be implemented. *(NB Following a Freedom of Information Question I did manage to obtain a copy of the report).*

Until recently there was only anecdotal evidence on the effects of these developments on young children's experiences of and attitudes towards literacy. How will this greater emphasis on phonics in the early stages, the isolated nature of much of their tuition in phonics, the new emphasis on pseudo words and the phonics check influence their understanding of the nature of literacy and attitude to reading, also their parents' ideas as to how to help their young children? We need evidence from the children, including those who passed the check, any who could read but failed the check, and those required to re-sit the following year. The assumption that the needs of those who fail to reach the arbitrary pass mark on this check may still be met by a continuing focus on synthetic phonics as the solution to their problems seems naive.

Freedom of Information Questions enabled me to estimate the large amount of money spent by government on synthetic phonics, including on commercial programmes. (This information I have recently updated and present in Appendix II). There are no records of how much has been spent by schools on commercial synthetic phonics products in attempting year on year to increase their percentage pass on the Phonics Screening Check, nor how much has been spent by institutions training primary school teachers in England in meeting Ofsted's demand for a focus on synthetic phonics. From what was originally referred to as a 'light touch' assessment this has become a high stakes form of data, used by Ofsted in its judgement of a school's standing. Although the results for individual schools are not published they are available on Raiseonline, accessible to Ofsted inspectors, and are in danger of achieving an even higher profile.

At the Westminster Education Forum Keynote Seminar on 7 December 2017 the findings of the consultation document were reported. The answer I received to a question to the speaker confirmed my suspicion that the future of the Phonics Screening Check was not indeed scrutinised as part of the consultation. See Appendix I for my question and the reply based on the written transcript.

The lack of evidence as to the views of teachers and parents on the effects, intended and unintended, of the Phonics Screening Check was the reason for planning the independent survey reported here. We felt that teachers and parents might have valuable evidence and be more concerned than their present comparative silence suggested. Our main aims are to establish whether in the view of the profession and parents what has now become a high stakes assessment does provide any valuable diagnostic information. In their opinion is it value for money, should it remain, and if so as a statutory measure? What is the value if any, in recording the result as pass/fail and in requiring any children who fail to retake the check the following year? It is important to consider the views of teachers and parents as to the effect the imposition of this assessment is having not only on those who fail but on children who were already reading with understanding at the time they were assessed. My attention was drawn to recent research into the effect of the check on grouping in early years classrooms in England shortly after we had completed the survey (Bradbury, 2018). In chapter 2 I present a summary of that research by Alice Bradbury and Guy Roberts-Holmes and other relevant researches.

The government insists that synthetic phonics be the mandatory only way of teaching all children in England to read. Furthermore, those who fail the check have more of the same, with the assumption that

this method will in the end achieve success for all children. At a time of cuts to school budgets it seems appropriate to put the expenditure on this policy under scrutiny. I have been able to find out how much money is being spent by DfE on the phonics check, synthetic phonics materials and training courses. There is no way to establish how much money is being spent by schools to achieve a higher percentage pass each year on the check in order to be judged successful by DfE and Ofsted. However, see Bradbury (2018) where

she mentions that over 5,000 schools are using a commercial scheme recommended by DfE. In this survey we have been able to ask Head Teachers their views on such expenditure.

### **The impact of the Phonics Screening Check on grouping by ability**

Using data from a nationwide survey of teachers (n 1,373), focus groups and in-depth interviews with teachers, Alice Bradbury and Guy Roberts-Holmes recently investigated the impact of the Phonics Screening Check on classroom practices of grouping children by ‘ability’. They found that the pressures of accountability have encouraged teachers to place children in groups according to ability, even when they had doubts about this practice and there is little evidence to suggest grouping improves attainment (Bradbury, 2018). She claims that these groupings for Phonics are facilitated by some of the widely used commercial schemes recommended by DfE. For many teachers Bradbury felt that grouping was motivated by the need to avoid failing to get a high percentage pass on the check. She refers to the fact that Read Write Inc, a commercial scheme, recommended by DfE and used in over 5,000 schools, was used to legitimise grouping, even when teachers disagreed. This was removing these decisions from professional judgement. This has not been a slow shift as the check has only been in existence since 2012 and there was evidence of the beginnings of this development shortly after the introduction of the check reported in the NFER research commissioned by DfE (see chapter 16 in Clark, 2016). Bradbury found that ‘Phonics was seen as a separate and distinct subject, rather than part of Reading’. She found that regular grouping for Phonics was common, not only in Year 1 but also even 58% of nursery teachers were grouping for Phonics (children age 3-4). This article by Bradbury has been published since we planned our survey. I have now read the full research report of the survey by Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes published in October 2017 (see chapter 2).

### **Comments**

The NFER research in 2015 raised issues about the costs and benefits of a one-off assessment versus teachers being well- trained to monitor children’s progress. What we have in England is a one-off pass/fail assessment, where the child reaches or fails to reach an arbitrary prescribed standard, an assessment that is expensive to administer, which may over-estimate the children at risk, which is not diagnostic and where funding was not allocated for alternative methods which might have been appropriate for at least some of the children who failed the check. It should be noted that Nick Gibb was not the only person to place his faith in the government’s phonics policy and the check. In spite of the evidence from the NFER research, Nicky Morgan, the Secretary of State for Education added her voice to that of Sir Michael Wilshaw, HMCI and Nick Gibb, in claiming in The House of Commons:

We have a relentless focus on academic standards, with 120,000 more six-year-olds on track to become confident readers thanks to our focus on phonics.

(19 October 2015: Hansard Column 680) (quoted in Clark, 2016: 144)

In 2012 Sir Michael Wilshaw had stated that:

Ofsted will sharpen its focus on phonics in routine inspections of all initial teacher education provision – primary and secondary and Further Education. Ofsted will also start a series of

unannounced inspections solely on the training of phonics teaching in providers of primary initial teacher education.

(Education, online No 461 16 March 2012)

(Quoted in Clark, 2014: 154, the first edition of *Learning to be Literate*)

With such official endorsements of phonics, not only in schools but in institutions that train primary teachers, the effect the Phonics Screening Check has had on practice in primary schools in England should come as no surprise.

In a new chapter 2 in this final report of our survey I summarise the evidence from the NFER research, commissioned by DfE and published in 2015; the research by Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes published in 2017 and the as yet unpublished research by Jane Carter on the views of teachers and children. Based on information gathered in 2015 for our research into baseline assessment I also detail the characteristics of Reception classes in three primary schools in The West Midlands. To my knowledge our survey is the first research to investigate the view of the parents, though unfortunately we failed to reach many parents of children whose mother tongue is not English. In chapter 3 the details of our independent survey into the views of Head Teachers, teachers and parents on The Phonics Screening Check are set out. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 report the findings which are summarised in chapter 7. In Appendices V, VI and VII you will find the questions asked, the summary tables of responses and recent further analyses conducted since we published the preliminary report in July 2018. The number of respondents who answered each question is noted and how many respondents added comments to the key questions. This proved to be an important aspect of the survey

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## Chapter 2 Research evidence on the Phonics Screening Check between 2012 and 2018

**Margaret M. Clark**

### **Background: Politics and policies**

In a written question in parliament on 18 July 2018, Peter Kyle asked the Secretary of State for Education, what steps he is taking to ensure that the Centre of Excellence for Literacy Teaching provides support for learners with dyslexia and other literacy needs. Nick Gibb's reply followed the same lines as all his statements on literacy, yet again referring 'to evidence-based practice in all aspects of early literacy, for all children, including systematic phonics'. He stated that the Department is currently in process of selecting English Hubs which will share effective practice with a particular focus on language and literacy teaching in reception and Key Stage 1.

He further claimed that 'there is also evidence that structured synthetic phonics teaching, in addition to engaging with reading books, can also help pupils in reception and Key Stage 1 with dyslexia to read well'. Further he again stated that: 'The reformed National Curriculum and the Phonics Screening Check, encourage teachers to use this method and since the introduction of The Phonics Screening Check in 2012, 154,000 more six-year-olds are on track to become fluent readers'. Again, he cited England's slightly higher ranking in PIRLS 2016 than in 2011 as proof of the success of the government's policy, yet still ignoring the statistically higher ranking of The Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland with very different literacy policies, and with the involvement of professionals in the development and implementation of their literacy policies (see Clark, 2018).

Among the recommendations in the Ofsted Report *Bold Beginnings* on the Reception curriculum published in November 2017 are the following:

All primary schools should

make sure that the teaching of reading, including systematic synthetic phonics, is the core purpose of the Reception Year

ensure that when children are learning to write resources are suitable for their stage of development and that they are taught correct pencil grip and how to sit correctly at a table.

Initial teacher education providers should

Devote a greater proportion of their training programme in the teaching of reading, including systematic synthetic phonics as the route to decoding words, and the composition of numbers, so that all newly qualified teachers are competent and confident to teach early literacy and mathematics.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/reception-curriculum-in-and-outstanding-schools>

We plan to investigate what proportion of their time is already devoted by students in training to synthetic phonics and whether Ofsted indeed does have such information.

That report has caused consternation and an outcry among early years professionals concerned that Ofsted has become the uncritical voice and enforcer of government policy. To quote Scott from her critique of Ofsted's current role: 'The power of Ofsted over approaches to the teaching of Reading'

Not only is Ofsted inspecting uncritically in the context of government policy, it is also failing to interrogate the evidence and to challenge the ill-conceived approach that is being imposed on young children. Indeed, the pressures in schools to show achievement and progress at all costs



and the fear of the effects of a weak Ofsted report are leading to counter-productive ways of working in many classrooms.

(Scott, 2018: 86)

The research reported in this chapter illustrates the effects of some of the practices feared by Scott.

A further policy of The Department for Education announced on 11 April 2018 was that it plans to introduce a statutory baseline assessment in autumn 2020. This further policy means that children will be assessed by their teachers shortly after they enter reception class. According to Nick Gibb who announced this, it will be used as the baseline for measuring the progress primary schools make with their pupils...providing a fairer measure of accountability. It has been reported that the assessment will be by the teachers, will last about 20 minutes and will be recorded on a computer. It will cover communication, language, literacy and early mathematical skills, and possibly self-regulation. The National Foundation for Educational Research has been awarded the contract worth around £10 million to undertake the pilot study. Apparently it was the only bidder as CEM and Early Excellence declined to tender. Yet these were the three assessments authorised by DfE over the period 2015-16 for which DfE reimbursed schools which used them during an earlier attempt to introduce such an assessment.

This is another example of a policy dictated by central government with a focus on accountability, which like the Phonics Screening Check (a statutory assessment since 2012) is likely to have major implications for practice in the early years. This move, like the recommendations of *Bold Beginnings*, the Ofsted report cited above, has been opposed by many researchers concerned about its implications for practice as well as the known unreliability of such assessments of young children (see Clark, 2017a, chapter 10 and a report by an expert panel from BERA, 2018).

## Research evidence

In this chapter the findings of three independent research studies on the impact of the Phonics Screening Check on classroom practice and the views of teachers on the value of the check are reported. The children now also have a voice. The first of these researches by the National Foundation for Educational Research was commissioned by the Department for Education over the period 2012-2015. The focus of the second research was on the views of teachers, and children who had recently sat the check. This is the only study of which I am aware to report the views of the children. This second research was Jane Carter's Doctoral study and has not yet been published. However, she gave a paper on the children's voices at the UKLA International Conference in July 2017 and on the views of the teachers in 2018. With her permission I have drawn the summary in this chapter from the power points from these two lectures. Her Doctorate can now be downloaded from <https://people/uwe.ac.uk/Person/JaneCarter>. The third research, published in October 2017, looked at the impact of grouping practices in primary schools on children and on educational professionals. The role of private companies in defining appropriate pedagogy is also considered. One focus in that study by Alice Bradbury and Guy Roberts-Holmes was Phonics which they claim has come to have an identity separate from Reading in the early years curriculum, possibly because of the high stakes nature of the Phonics Screening Check taken by all children at the end of Year 1 in England. This appears to have led to streaming as early as in Nursery classes. Brief reference will also be made to information gathered by the author and her team during research into baseline assessment. During this research we collected information on the characteristics of children in Reception class in three primary schools in The West Midlands. It brings alive the nature of many of the classes on which current government mandatory literacy policy and the check may now be having a major impact. One might question whether pressure on their teachers to attain a high percentage pass on the Phonics Screening Check should be a priority for teachers.

I had made a detailed study of the NFER research and reported the findings in Clark, 2016, chapter 16. I was, therefore, able to draw on that published source for this chapter. I had also referred to the children's voices aspect of Jane Carter's research with quotations in Clark, 2017b: 92-93. Her more recent report on the views of the teachers became available in July 2018 after we had completed our survey. It was also only after we had completed our survey that my attention was drawn to an article in 2018 by Alice Bradbury on the third research. I was able to refer to its findings in chapter 1 of our preliminary report. I have now made a detailed study of the research report by Alice Bradbury and Guy Roberts-Holmes published in October 2017 and drawn on that for this chapter. Jane Carter, Alice Bradbury and Guy Roberts-Holmes confirm that I have fairly represented their findings.

There is evidence from these researches that many of the issues commented upon by the respondents to our survey had been raised previously, many even immediately after the introduction of the check, yet have been ignored by policy makers.

### **I Phonic Screening Check Evaluation, Final Report**

(Walker, M., Sainsbury, M., Worth, J., Bamforth, H., and Betts, H, (2015)

This section is based on chapter 16 of Clark, 2016. In June 2012, for the first time the Phonics Screening Check was administered to all Year 1 children in England. In June 2013 a further cohort of children in Year 1 sat a similar check and those children who had failed to reach an acceptable level (32 out of 40 words correct) were required to re sit the check at the end of Year 2. The DfE commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research to undertake research over the period 2012-2015 to consider the impact of the check on the teaching of phonics in primary schools, on the wider literacy curriculum and on the standard of reading. An interim report was published in 2013. Clearly by this stage only some aspects of the remit could be considered. In June 2015 the final NFER Report was published (see Clark, 2016: chapter 16).

The interim report was based on case study interviews in 14 primary schools in June and July 2012; baseline surveys of 844 literacy coordinators and 940 Year 1 teachers. The final report draws on data over three timepoints. In 2014 there were interviews with staff in 19 primary schools, surveys of 573 literacy coordinators and 652 Year 1 teachers immediately after the check in June 2014. Many of the findings in the final report were anticipated in the interim report. Already at that time issues were raised about the value of the check for certain types of pupils. This included not only children with special educational needs, but also high ability pupils, those already reading and those with English as an additional language.

Year 1 teachers expressed mixed views on the value of the check, although benefits were acknowledged, in confirming the results of other assessments, and placing an emphasis on phonics teaching. However, most Year 1 and Year 2 teachers reported that phonics teaching already took place daily and on average two hours per week. Around 90 per cent of schools already taught discrete phonics sessions in Reception and Years 1 and 2. Literacy coordinators were less favourably disposed to the check than teachers, feeling that the check results do not reveal anything of which teachers were unaware. Most teachers felt the check was not suitable for children with speech, language and communication needs and children with other learning difficulties. Reference was made to the pseudo words distracting some of these children and in some case these children struggled to communicate their answers clearly (Clark, 2016: 132).

Most teachers interviewed in the case study visits to schools reported that, 'the check would have minimal, if any impact on the standard of reading and writing in their school in the future (Clark, 2016:133).

The evaluation did not find any evidence of improvement in pupils' literacy performance, or in progress that could be clearly attributed to the check. The most frequently reported change, already in 2014, was an

increase in the pace of phonics teaching and an increased focus on pseudo words (see Clark, 2016: 135). The pattern described in these analyses suggested that a strong enthusiasm for synthetic phonics and the check amongst teachers tended to be associated with higher phonics attainment as measured by the check but not with improvement in reading and writing assessment at the end of Key Stage 1.

There was little evidence to suggest that many schools had moved towards a position whereby they were teaching systematic phonics ‘first and fast’, to the exclusion of other word strategies. Although most schools were committed to teaching phonics, they did not apparently see this as incompatible with the teaching of other decoding strategies.

In the NFER blog in 2015 by Matt Walker, one of the authors of the report, he commented that:

In spite of these findings the government remains committed to the retention and indeed possible extension of the phonics check and related initiatives.

That research, though commissioned by DfE, appears to have been ignored by policymakers. More recent researches are still drawing attention to these same issues and in our survey many respondents commented on these same problems.

## **II An Illuminative evaluation of the Phonics Screening Check: listening to the voices of children and their teachers (Jane Carter)**

This was the topic of Jane Carter’s Doctoral research which I hope will soon be available as a publication. Jane gave a paper on the children’s voices at the UKLA International Conference in 2017, and on the teachers’ voices in 2018. With her permission I gave examples of comments from the children shortly after they had sat the check, based on her 2017 presentation (in Clark, 2017b: 92-93). Here I add to that evidence from her 2018 presentation at the UKLA International Conference evidence on the teachers’ voices.

The children’s voices to quote Jane Carter:

The group that is at the heart of the reading debate, those learning to read, have not, as yet been listened to.

I had been concerned that the views of the children on their experience of the check had not previously been explored so was pleased that Jane shared her power points with me. In her cleverly designed study, the children were the experts as they tried to explain to Beegu, a soft toy, based on the character in the children’s book by Alexis Deacon how Beegu could learn to read: they were Beegu’s teachers. This enabled the children, unprompted by the researcher, to talk about classroom practice including phonics, alien words and other approaches to learning to read they had experienced.

One child suggested that the purpose of books was not to read or enjoy but: ‘to help you with your sounds’. Some children raised the issue of ‘alien’ words. Among the answers to this observation: ‘they just help you with your sounds’.

The children realised that in the check if a word had an alien next to it then it wasn’t a real word. When asked if these words helped one child responded: ‘They don’t they just confuse us!’

Jane Carter stated that: ‘There is widespread teaching to the test that has nothing to do with developing children as readers...and everything to do with raising test scores’. However, Carter stressed that in spite of this, in some cases the children are ‘absorbing the policy voice and a passion for reading for pleasure’. Clearly the teachers were torn between raising as required the percentage pass on the check (as distinct from teaching effective phonics for reading) and providing a rich environment of literacy learning for the

children. The children also recognised that many classroom practices, e.g. Treasure or Trash Words, real or not real words, were not needed. This indicated that the purpose of 'alien words; as a useful assessment tool was being misunderstood by teachers and that alien words were being taught as part of the curriculum'. In this research Jane reveals what are perhaps unintended consequences of the policy, in particular, the effect on practice in classrooms as a consequence of the current high stakes nature of the check.

### The teachers' voices

Jane Carter explored the extent to which the Phonics Screening Check framed the teaching practices of being a teacher of reading. She was following up the NFER research commissioned by DfE which looked at the effects shortly after the implementation of synthetic phonics as the method of teaching reading and of the introduction of the PSC in 2012 (Walker *et al.*, 2015; Clark, 2016: chapter 16). Particularly interesting is what she refers to as possible 'Living contradictions' within the teachers' views and practices.

Jane Carter gathered data from a questionnaire in 2016 completed by 59 Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 teachers. In October 2016 she conducted focus groups in seven schools to follow up ideas and issues raised in the teacher questionnaire.

57 of 59 teachers either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that teaching phonics knowledge was essential for the teaching of reading. There were interesting contradictions, however, as 25 respondents agreed or strongly agreed that 'phonics should be taught fast and first before other strategies'. Yet, 51 of the 59 respondents also agreed or strongly agreed that 'phonics must be taught at the same time and alongside other strategies' and all 59 agreed or strongly agreed that teaching a range of strategies to word reading was essential. Thus, many teachers while appearing to subscribe to government policy appeared to hold views that were incompatible. Most teachers claimed to have adapted their practice to government policy (22 of 24 Year 1 teachers). What is important is that these teachers did not also say this adaptation of practice was to ensure children developed as readers – teachers saw the check as unconnected to reading. Most of the teachers said they had adapted their practice in order to improve PSC scores and this rises to all, 24 Year 1 teachers. This was explored further in the focus groups where a number of teachers referred to the need because of the check to practice alien words. One teacher commented in a focus group:

'It's not a good thing to have to admit we teach to the test but we have to do it'.

There were some disturbing comments made by the teachers concerning the cultural context of the classroom:

'It is just so mechanised'

'Pounding them with sounds'

'We are ramming it down their throats'.

Carter stated that whatever the teacher practices some (most) children were positive about reading and teachers showed commitment to developing children as readers who enjoyed reading and read for pleasure. However, she suggested her research should raise the following questions for policy makers:

- For the higher attaining readers (who could pass the test at an earlier age) is being prepared for the check throughout the year a backward step?
- 'First fast and only' - so when does the 'first' period end?
- Children that 'pass' – what does this really mean in terms of current and future reading?

### III Grouping in Early Years and Key Stage 1 “A Necessary Evil”?

The Final Report of this research by Alice Bradbury and Guy Roberts-Holmes was published in October 2017 (Bradbury, A. and Roberts-Holmes, G., 2017 see also Bradbury, A., 2018).

This report gives recent evidence on widespread effects of the Phonics Screening Check on classroom practices in early years classrooms in England. The research which was carried out between April and June 2017 involved a nationwide survey and interviews at four case study primary schools. There were 1373 respondents to the online survey with a spread across Reception, Years 1 and 2 and some Nursery teachers. Interviews were also conducted in four primary schools in different regions of England. No Academy schools or areas which have selection were included in the study.

The survey data revealed that grouping is most common for Phonics (76%) Reading (57%) and Literacy (54%). They found that grouping for Phonics was likely to be across the year group rather than as for Literacy and Maths within the class. In the survey it was found that 58% of 118 Nursery teachers who responded used grouping for Phonics. In Reception this rose to 81%, in Year 1 it was 78%. This grouping for Phonics declined in Year 2.

It appears that phonics was seen as a distinct subject which required specific pedagogic practices, separate from Reading. The researchers suggest that this practice was influenced by the use of Phonics schemes from private companies (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes: 18). The teachers stated that: ‘because the children were aware of which group they were placed in and why, this led to reduced self-esteem and confidence’ (p. 22). In the report the effect of these groupings on the mental health of the young children, an issue raised by some teachers, is discussed.

Many survey respondents commented that this practice of grouping was determined by the Senior Management. To quote: ‘This language of fear and risk indicates the high stakes nature of testing in early years and Key Stage 1’. This was it is claimed ‘associated with taking preparation for tests seriously’. It is suggested that only those who were in a position of strength, either through their successful results or personal professional standing felt able to challenge the orthodoxy of grouping’ (p. 30). Teachers felt under pressure to use this practice to ensure their assessment results were acceptable and many written comments summed this up. It was noted that there was widespread reluctance to inform parents, showing the extent of teachers’ contradictory feelings about grouping (p. 35).

Chapter 5 in the report is devoted to what is described as an ‘unexpected finding’ namely the role of private companies in determining schools’ grouping policies, particularly Phonics Read Write Inc which was said to be the most mentioned phonics company, which appeared to influence grouping even in schools which did not buy the actual scheme. The researchers comment that this scheme recommends that pupils are grouped across the school ‘in homogenous groups’. In one case study school, children were grouped for Phonics across the school, thus some Key Stage 2 children were placed with Key Stage 1 children. As the Phonics Screening Check is an important early accountability measures for schools, teachers felt that their grouping decisions for Phonics were partly determined by these targets.

To quote from the research:

Although the Phonics Screening Check is described as a ‘light-touch assessment there are consequences for both schools and pupils if the expected levels are to be met,’ and grouping and interventions are seen as the solution.

Furthermore, it is suggested that this leads to resources being prioritised on the basis of improving Phonics results; this it is claimed encourages the use of external schemes such as Read Write Inc. This research found evidence of resources being distributed to focus on borderline groups while leaving those guaranteed to pass and those ‘hopeless cases to one side’ (Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes, 2017: 6.2).

Reference is made to different resources and staff being allocated to different groups, for example lower groups being taught by teaching assistants. Mention is also made of adverse effects on the youngest children of the check and grouping. Specific attention is also drawn to intervention as a form of grouping, and in some schools, both grouping and interventions are in place.

In the light of their findings these researchers recommend that:

- Policy makers should examine whether the explicit and implicit support for grouping in policy documentation is appropriate, in the light of their stated aims of reducing gaps in attainment
- Policy makers should make the Phonics Screening Check non-statutory, because of the impact on grouping practices which, from age three, can have detrimental effects on children's wellbeing.

Finally, policy makers should also be aware of the frustration that teachers feel with Phonics companies undermining teachers' professional decision-making.

#### **IV Contrasting patterns in three Reception classes**

As part of a research into baseline assessment in 2015 and 2016 at Newman University which I directed, we gathered detailed information on Reception classes in three schools in the West Midlands. This was presented at a research seminar in February 2016 (Clark, 2017a chapter 10).

In a sample of only three primary schools, there were 16 different languages in the Reception classes in addition to English. In the four Reception classes 117 children were tested on baseline assessment in 2015, and for 52 English was not their first language. There was a year's difference in age between the oldest and young children; 26 children were born in September, October or November 2010, while 42 were born in June, July or August 2011. Already further children had entered these classes, for some of whom English was not their first language. Current education policy in England does not appear to acknowledge the importance of assessing how competent children are in their home language when they start primary school, including those whose first language is not English. I referred to new research by UNESCO, that *40% don't access education in a language they understand*, and that, 'A review of 40 countries' education plans found that less than half recognised the importance of teaching children in their home language, particularly in the early grades and that teachers are rarely prepared for the reality of bilingual classrooms' (*Education Journal*, 260: 12).

*School 1.* Early Excellence was used for baseline assessment in 2015. This school had a nursery class. There were 59 children (24 boys and 35 girls) in two Reception classes. Three whose first language was not English had arrived since the deadline for completion of baseline assessment.

\*32 of the children assessed did not have English as their first language and there were 11 different languages spoken by the children in the Reception classes.

Urdu 11, Punjabi 13, Hindi 2, Shona 1, Romanian 1, Lithuanian 1, French 1, Bulgarian 1, Swahili 1. (plus three not assessed Portuguese 1, Lithuanian 1 and Polish 1).

16 of the children assessed were born in September to November 2010 (the oldest) and 19 were born in June, July or August (the youngest).

*School 2.* Early Excellence was used for baseline assessment in 2015. This school did not have a nursery class. There were 31 children (15 boys and 16 girls) in the Reception class. All these children were assessed.

\*18 of children who were assessed did not have English as their first language. There were six different languages apart from English. Polish 2, French (African) 3, Tigrinyan (Eritrea) 7 Chinese 4, Estonian 1, Wolof (West African Language) 1.

Seven of the children who were assessed were born in September, October or November 2010 (the oldest and 11 were born in June, July or August 2011 (the youngest).

There were two looked after children in Reception class.

*School 3.* Early Excellence was used for assessment in 2015. This school did not have a nursery class. There were 30 children (14 boys and 16 girls) in Reception class and all were assessed.

\*There were two children whose first language was not English, one speaks Punjabi, the other Arabic.

Three children were born in September, October or November 2010 (the oldest) and 12 children were born in June, July or August 2011 (the youngest).

\*We do not have an assessment of how fluent in English these children were. It is possible that some of these children may speak more than one other language.

### **Final comment**

The detailed information from the above research on the possible characteristics of children within even a single Reception class in primary schools in England, though collected for a different purpose, is pertinent to the current debate when taken together with the other research cited in this chapter. It brings home the reality of Reception classes in many schools in England.

In a speech on 31 July 2018 at the Resolution Foundation, Damian Hinds the Secretary of State for Education, gave his vision for boosting social mobility. He stressed the importance of the home environment but also stressed the importance of Reception class:

Most pressingly it is a persistent scandal that we have children starting school and struggling to communicate, to speak in full sentences.

Right now 28% of children finish their reception year without the early communication and reading skills they need to thrive.

(<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-education>)

(<https://gov.uk/government/people/damian-hinds>)

Faced with the findings of the research reported in this chapter teachers could be forgiven for questioning whether the government's current priorities for the teaching of reading in the early years as set out in the Ofsted Report *Bold Beginnings* are indeed appropriate to bridge this gap, or are evidence-based.

The researches cited here show many unintended as well as intended consequences of the Phonics Screening Check. While some of this evidence has only recently been published it is disturbing that DfE was alerted to some of the concerns of the teaching professionals soon after the Phonics Screening Check was introduced in 2012, and, in research commissioned by DfE! The new policies noted at the beginning of this chapter, including baseline assessment, may have further unintended consequences for young children during their early years in primary schools in England. It is disappointing that so little attention is paid by government either to the warnings of professionals or to research evidence other than that which appears to support government policy.

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## **Chapter 3 A survey of the views of Head Teachers, teachers and parents on the Phonics Screening Check 2012-2017**

**Margaret M. Clark and Susan Atkinson**

### **Introduction**

The government in England did not involve the teaching profession in the development or planning for the implementation of what is now a high stakes statutory assessment of reading, the Phonics Screening Check, or the decision to make synthetic phonics the mandated only way to teach reading to all children in state schools. The professionals have also not been consulted as to the future of the check, whether in their view it should remain statutory, become voluntary or be abolished (see Appendix I). Schools are judged by the Department for Education and Ofsted by the percentage pass on the Phonic Screening Check with a requirement to increase the percentage pass each year. Universities involved in teacher education are required to present synthetic phonics as the method of teaching reading and there seems no opportunity for academics to challenge this policy in their teaching, in dialogue with the Department for Education, or even with other academics. Furthermore, the funds allocated by DfE since 2012 for literacy courses and materials, which have been substantial, are with synthetic phonics at their core (See Appendix II).

There is little evidence that the views of teachers or parents as to the effects of the check, intended and unintended, on the literacy experiences of young children in England have been sought by the government since the early research by NFER commissioned by DfE shortly after the check was introduced in 2012 (see chapter 16 in Clark, 2016). Here in chapter 2 we cite evidence that was available as early as 2014 and 2015 raising issues about the check based on that research. The final report by NFER was published as early as 2015. Yet, it appears that the disquiet expressed by some teachers interviewed during that research was ignored by policymakers:

the effects of the check even then on classroom practice;

that the check was inappropriate for many children, those who could already read and those with speech problems among others;

that the check told them little they did not already know.

Literacy coordinators were found to be even more critical of the check than teachers (see chapter 2).

In the intervening years criticism of the check by teachers and even academics involved in teacher education has been muted. Their silence may be assumed by politicians to indicate that they are in support of the policy or are unconcerned. Further research has appeared since we planned our survey revealing disturbing effects on classroom practice in the early years as the check has moved from what was claimed to be ‘a light touch diagnostic assessment’ to a high stakes assessment for accountability. Attempts to achieve, as required by DfE and Ofsted, a higher percentage pass on the check each year seem in many early years classrooms in England to have led to preparation for the check dominating children’s early literacy experiences (see Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes and Jane Carter as summarised here in chapter 2).

There is brief reference in the NFER report to communication with parents/carers about the check. This was shortly after the check was introduced. Most schools it appears did provide some information to parents prior to the administration of the check, and about the outcome. Some parents in the case study schools were interviewed. It is not stated how many, how they were selected, what questions they were asked or the answers they gave (see Clark, 2016:136-137). We have found no other evidence, prior to our

survey, of research into the views of parents about the check, how much they know about the check, and whether any are concerned at its effect on their children. The views of parents whose children passed the check as well as those whose children failed and were required to re-sit it the following year should be of concern. Our survey offers some evidence of the concerns of parents, though we were disappointed to have so few parents whose children's home language is not English among our respondents. In chapter 2 we describe the composition of three reception classes in the West Midlands based on data collected for our research on baseline assessment to illustrate possible characteristics in many early years classrooms in England faced with this policy. Surely the powerful role of current literacy policy in determining classroom practices in the early years should be questioned in the face of such evidence?

### **The survey**

The aim of this independent survey, preliminary results of which were reported in July 2018, was to explore the views of Head Teachers, teachers who have been involved in administering the Phonics Screening Check and parents whose children have been assessed. The response to the survey has shown that their relative silence until now should not be taken as evidence that they are uninterested or unconcerned. Not only did busy professionals and parents complete the survey but many took time to add comments. The survey was anonymous, but we have been contacted by a number of those who completed the survey who have expressed interest to be involved in further research or to provide further information. Any further research will require us to submit a new proposal to the ethics committees and would require us to seek informed consent from anyone wishing to participate.

Here we present our final report following more complex analyses of the data over the last few months. This analysis was undertaken by Susan Atkinson of Leeds Beckett University who outlines it in this chapter. We feel our findings have valuable messages for policymakers and practitioners. We acknowledge the limitations of such a survey and appreciate that though there were advantages in an anonymous survey there are dangers. We appreciate that to view the questions it was necessary to open the links and some of the incomplete forms may be from people who merely wanted to see the content of the survey. However, we decided to retain all forms submitted rather than face criticism for making what might be claimed to be an arbitrary decision to delete some. Readers can check in the appendices the precise questions asked, the answers and number of respondents answering each question, also how many respondents made comments in addition to answering the multiple-choice questions (see Appendices V, VI and VII). In this final report the more complex analyses enable us to relate responses to the characteristics of those who answered. We also now provide more information on the comments made by many respondents.

Care was taken to frame the questions so that they were not leading questions and advice was sought from experienced literacy researchers. We stressed in the notice about the survey that this was an independent survey and that we encouraged those in support of current government policy to complete the survey as well as those with concerns. Associations we approached were merely asked to publicise the notice and encourage members to complete the survey. In addition, we advertised it as widely as possible and do appear to have reached teachers and parents from all regions in England.

In Appendix IV can be seen the information about the survey which was widely circulated nationwide in England encouraging teachers and parents to complete the survey. There were three links to the research on survey monkey, one for Head Teachers another for teachers who had assessed children on the Phonic Screening Check, the third for parents any of whose children had been assessed. Parents who had more than one child assessed on the check were asked to complete the survey for their child most recently assessed. We assured anyone who completed the survey that their results would remain anonymous. However, they could contact us at a dedicated email address should they wish to receive a copy of the report and/or wish to be contacted to contribute to any further aspect of the research. To assess the generalisability of our

results we asked respondents to indicate in which region of the country they are based. Head Teachers and teachers were asked how long they had been teaching as it was felt this might influence their views. We also asked teachers if they were also parents any of whose children had been assessed, and parents how many of them were also teachers who had assessed children on the check. Parents who had more than one child who had sat the check were asked to complete the survey for their child who had sat the check most recently. They were also asked if their child had passed or failed the check.

Survey questions were circulated for comment to experienced literacy researchers and were approved by the ethics committees at both Newman and Leeds Beckett Universities. The survey was piloted with staff and students in Newman University to ensure that the alternative answers covered all possibilities. We are indebted to Bob Ridge-Stearn, Head of ELearning at Newman University, who converted our questions into the format for survey monkey and ensured that the alternative questions were appropriate. In addition to multiple choice answers we allowed space for comments to selected questions. The invitation to participate in the survey is to be found in Appendix IV.

The survey was open for about four weeks and closed on 25 May 2018. Information about the survey was widely distributed to their members by national associations such as NEU, NAPE, UKLA, TACTYC, BERA, to several parent associations, to universities who are involved in training primary teachers and to many literacy researchers with contact with teachers and parents. The independent nature of the survey was stressed and as can be seen from Appendix IV, we hoped for information on their views from those in support of current government literacy policy as well as those with concerns. In addition to questions with multiple choice answers there were key questions where space was available for respondents to make comments. Associations we approached were merely asked to publicise the notice and encourage members to complete the survey. In addition, we advertised it as widely as possible and do appear to have reached teachers and parents from all regions in England. We were surprised and gratified at how many respondents availed themselves of this opportunity. In our preliminary report we presented information based on the survey monkey analysis and examples of comments made in answer to selected questions.

In this final report, based on more complex analyses undertaken over the last few months, the Head Teacher results are reported in chapter 4, those of the teachers in chapter 5 and the parents in chapter 6. In chapter 7 we summarise our findings and consider their implications for policy and practice. In Appendices V, VI and VII all the questions and tables of results from the preliminary analyses from survey monkey are to be found and a summary of the results of the further analyses. We had responses from 230 Head Teachers; 1348 teachers and 419 parents.

The survey is not a funded research project and has received no grants.

### **The additional analyses undertaken for the survey since July 2018**

#### **Head Teacher survey:**

We wanted to find out whether there were significant differences in responses to items on the questionnaire between Head Teachers who:

- worked in primary or infant schools;
- had administered the check or had not administered the check;
- were parents of a child who had taken the Phonics Screening Check and those who were not.

The items selected for analysis were:

Item 15: Does the Phonics Check provide you with information on individual children which you did not already have?

Item 21: Do you think the Check should remain statutory for all children in Year 1?

Item 22: In England, synthetic phonics is mandated as the only method for teaching children to read. To what extent do you agree with this government policy?

Chi-square tests were selected for the analyses because all the data is categorical.

### **Teacher survey:**

We wanted to find out whether there were significant differences in responses to items on the questionnaire between teachers who were parents of a child who had taken the phonics screening check and those who were not, and whether there were differences depending on length of service. The items selected were:

Item 12: Have you observed children stressed during the check?

Item 20: How accurate do you regard the Phonics Screening Check to be in its assessment of children's decoding skills?

Item 21: Do you feel it is useful to include both real and pseudo/alien words in the check?

Item 26: Do you think the Phonics Check should remain statutory, become voluntary or be discontinued?

Item 27: If the Check remains statutory, should children who fail to achieve a mark of 32 in Year 1 resit the Check in Year 2?

Item 28: In England, synthetic phonics is mandated as the only method for teaching children to read. to what extent do you agree with this government policy?

Chi-square tests were selected for the analyses because all the data is categorical.

### **Parent survey:**

We wanted to find out whether there were significant differences in responses to items on the questionnaire between groups of parents. Chi-square tests were selected for the analyses because all the data is categorical. We wanted to find out if parental views on government literacy policy and the check should remain statutory were affected by any of the factors in the first column of the table below:

	Parental views: Agree with government literacy policy?	Parental views: Should screening check remain statutory?
Seen a copy of screening check		
Number of children you have who have taken test		
Is this your first child to take Check?		
Sex of child		
Is your first language English?		

Did the school inform you about the Check?		
Were you asked to prepare your child?		
Did the Check affect your child		
Did your child pass?		
How well could they read when they did the Check?		
Do they enjoy reading?		
Should the Check remain statutory?		
Are you a teacher who has administered the Check?		

## Appendices

Appendix I The statement at the Westminster Forum in December 2017 which revealed that the Department for Education had not sought the views of teachers on the future of the check in the consultation on assessment in primary schools in 2017.

Appendix II Summarises expenditure by the Department for Education on synthetic phonics, including the Phonics Screening Check, commercial materials and training courses. This is based on the response by Department for Education to Freedom of Information Questions.

Appendix III Misty Adoniou updates information from Australia about plans to introduce the Phonics Screening Check in at least some states.

Appendix IV The information on the survey circulated inviting teachers and parents to take part.

\*Appendices V, VI and VII state the precise questions asked, the tables of answers provided by survey monkey, show how many respondents answered each question and how many made comments.

\*Appendices V, VI and VII now have summaries of the additional analyses undertaken since the preliminary report.

## Chapter 4 Head Teachers' Views on the Phonics Screening Check

Sue Reid

### Introduction

During the final four weeks of the Spring Term 2018, Head Teachers were invited to take part in an independent survey on Survey Monkey. The survey was widely advertised and closed on 25 May 2018. Anonymity was assured for all participants but if they wished to have a copy of the report or to take part in further research a secure email address, which could be accessed only by the researchers was given. We wanted to determine if we had a representative sample and therefore asked the Head Teachers to indicate the region in England where their school was, how long they had been teaching and whether they were the parents of children who had been assessed on the phonics check. In all three surveys, which are part of this study many, but not all, respondents answered all questions. Some of the forms were incomplete and this may have been because some people just wanted to see the questions and in order to do this they would have had to open the survey. As a research team we took the decision to include all the data as we felt we might be criticised for any omissions. However, readers can see just how many of the respondents answered each question and therefore on how many responses we have based any conclusions. All the questions and answers tables are in Appendix V, together with a summary of the results of the additional analyses.

We had 230 forms returned by Head Teachers and all respondents answered questions 1 to 4. Question 1 asked 'Where is your school?' Head Teachers from across the country participated with the greatest number, 56 (24.35%) from the south-east with the fewest respondents 11 (4.78%) from the north-east and south-west 18 (8.26%). Question 2 asked about the type of school, with 86% of the Head Teachers of primary schools and 10% Head Teachers of Infant (KS1 only) schools with one respondent the Head Teacher of a junior school. The answers to question 3 about length of service, as would be expected for senior leaders, showed the majority (77%) had over 10 years experience with 42% having more than 20 years teaching experience. Question 4, 55% of Head Teacher respondents had administered the check and Question 5, answered by 127, indicated that 68.50% had done so to more than 40 children. There were 189 responses to Question 6, which showed that three quarters were not the parents of children who had taken the phonics check. The information in these six questions indicates that this sample of Head Teachers from across all regions of England are experienced practitioners many of whom have administered the check and therefore it can be assumed have an awareness of the implications of the phonics check from both a leadership and classroom practice perspective.

A summary of the results of these six questions is given below:

- Head Teachers from all regions of England responded to the survey
- A majority of Head Teachers had over 10 years teaching experience
- A small majority of Head Teachers had administered the phonics check and of these a significant majority had administered the check to over 40 pupils

The questions and tables with the answers from the Head Teachers can be found in Appendix V. As well as the multiple-choice answers, space was made available for respondents to make comments on questions, 14, 17, 20 and 22. A selection of these comments is included in this chapter.

### Results

*Q. 7: What was the percentage pass on the check in your school for children in Year 1 in 2012 (the first year of the check)?*

189 Head Teachers answered this question

***Q. 8: What was the percentage pass on the check in your school for children in Year 1 in 2017?***

189 Head Teachers answered this question

Questions 7 and 8 of the survey showed that the number of children who reached the required standard has risen from the implementation of the check in 2012 to 2017 with just over 11% of Head Teachers reporting that under 50% of their pupils passed the check in 2012 but only 0.53% recorded this in 2017. The percentage of Head Teachers reporting that over 80% of their children were successful in the check has also risen from 2012 when just under 17% achieved the required grade to 2017 when 56% of respondents reported that more than 80% of their pupils passed the check.

***Q. 9: Approximately how many children in Year 1 in your school sat the check in 2017?***

189 Head Teachers answered this question with 55.30% stating that more than 40 pupils took the check

***Q. 10: How many children re-sat the check in Year 2 in 2017?***

189 Head Teachers answered this question: 56% answered that more than 6 children had re-sat the check in 2017

***Q. 11: Are parents told about the check in advance? (select all that apply)***

180 Head Teachers answered this question with the majority indicating that parents are told in advance either orally or in writing.

***Q. 12: Are parents told whether their child passed or failed the check? (select all that apply)***

180 Head Teachers answered this question and only 5% said that parents were not told.

***Q. 13: Are parents told their child's actual mark on the check?***

180 Head Teachers answered this question and just over 50% told parents their child's actual mark.

***Q.14: Has the phonics check affected the way you now teach children to read in your school?***

Answer Choices	Responses	
No	10.00%	18
Not much	18.33%	33
Somewhat	39.44%	71
A great deal	32.22%	58
	Answered	180
	Skipped	50

73 Comments

The table above shows the Head Teachers' answer to question 14 and as can be seen there was a range of results but the majority, just over 71% stating 'somewhat' or 'a great deal'. Comments were invited to elaborate on the answers given and as can be seen there were 180 responses to this question and of those 73 respondents added a comment. Many of them were supportive of the need to teach phonics with one Head Teacher stating that there was *'much more rigour now with the check'* and another, who was positive about the effect the phonics check has had on her knowledge and understanding of phonics, therefore considered it had affected a great deal the way phonics is taught in her school. It is also interesting to note that as a result of the Phonics Screening Check, three Head Teachers have introduced Read Write Inc. into their schools and feel this is ensuring consistency in the teaching of phonics, other Heads have introduced daily phonics sessions.

However, although there were some positive comments, many concerns were raised. Many Head Teachers expressed disquiet about the use of pseudo/non/alien words in the phonics check, 27 commenting on the focus that is now put on the teaching of alien/pseudo/ non-words in Year 1 to the detriment of other reading strategies. One respondent observed that although phonics plays an important part in the teaching of reading, comprehension skills, picture clues, whole word reading are also important. Some Head Teachers were concerned at the effect of the inclusion of non-words in the check, particularly their effect on fluent readers, with one Head noting: *'Our children who were reading for meaning would try to make sense of the nonsense word on the test and therefore failed the test.'*

This was echoed by other respondents who stated that because of the inclusion of alien words they were teaching children to read nonsense words *'especially in the Spring term.'* Furthermore, due to the high stakes nature of the check, Heads reported that there was more pre-check testing and teaching to the test to ensure that children were prepared for the check. Another Head cited the linking of the results of the check to teachers' performance as an issue which has resulted in pressure on staff and more testing for children.

This pressure to ensure attainment for the school was also confirmed by one Head who came under pressure from the Local Authority, *'because of the impact on their results.'* With the focus on decoding, the negative impact on comprehension skills was cited by seven Head Teachers all of whom felt that the phonics check had affected the teaching of reading somewhat or a great deal. They considered that the focus on phonics and specifically the use of pseudo words had had an adverse impact on the time given to the teaching of comprehension skills with one Head summing it up, *'Less focus on comprehension teaching to free up time for more focused phonics teaching.'* Another stated, *'More time on phonics, less time on the breadth of the curriculum.'*

***Q. 15: Does the phonics check provide you with information on individual children which you did not already have?***

180 Head Teachers answered this question and 90% answered that the check did not give them any additional information

***Q. 16: Do you think it is useful to have real and pseudo/alien words in the check?***

180 Head Teachers answered this question.

80% of respondents did not think that pseudo/alien words were useful in the check



<b>Q17: Do you think it is useful to assess all children on the phonics check in Year 1?</b>		
<b>If no, which children would you exclude?</b>		
Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	22.22%	40
No	77.78%	140
	Answered	180
	Skipped	50

#### 107 Comments

An overwhelming majority of Head Teachers, 140 out of the 180 who responded to this question, consider that the check is not useful. This question asked Heads to comment on which children they would exclude if the answered that they considered the check was not useful. 107 Head Teachers took the time to make a comment and of those, 25 stated that they would exclude all of the children in their school from the check with 10 of these indicating that they did not find the check useful, adding that because they already had internal assessments they were able to make professional judgements about the children's phonics ability. Others expressed concern on the *testing* of 6-year-olds, stating that... *'They are not ready emotionally to be sitting statutory tests however informally you are able to dress them up'*. Furthermore, those who made a response identified a range of children whom they considered should be excluded. These included fluent readers, *'Higher ability who can read fluently and don't need to use phonics to sound out and blend any more'*. This could include both those who have progressed beyond the need to use phonics or, as alluded to in other questions in this survey, those who learn to read in ways other than phonetically. A further group of 41 respondents to this question believed that those children working below the expected standard for Year 1 and those children who have been assessed by the school as having special needs (SEN/D) or have a speech impediment or developmental delay should not be entered for the check. One Head expressed concern on the emotional impact that the check will have on these children *'... it can be very demoralizing for a child who cannot sound out words above CVC.'* This was supported by another respondent who stated that she would exclude *'children who you know will score a demoralising score.'* Also one Head summed up that in her school *'EAL, summer born, children whom our internal checks show they are not at the standard of the test.'* should be excluded from the check. This view was shared by a number of other Heads who also believed that newly arrived children and the youngest children in the class were not ready to be entered for this statutory assessment. The main issues as to those children Heads considered should be excluded, surrounded those children who were unable to access the check or would not be successful plus those who are already reading fluently. Notwithstanding that a number would like to see all children excluded and, as one Head commented in justification of this... *'I haven't worked with a teacher yet who doesn't know their children in depth. They know who and how to support pre reading and reading skills.'*

Head Teachers trust their teachers who are skilled professionals to use their expertise to support children's learning and progression.

#### **Q. 18: Do you think pass/fail should be recorded for the check?**

180 Head Teachers answered this question and 70% did not think pass /fail should be recorded.

#### **Q. 19: Is it useful to re-test children in Year 2 who fail the check in Year 1?**

180 Head Teachers answered this question and almost 64% did not feel it is useful to re-test.

<b>Q20: Do you buy commercial synthetic phonics materials or training for your school?</b> <i>If yes, please give details.</i>		
Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	45.56%	82
No	54.44%	98
	Answered	180
	Skipped	50

62 Comments

The table shows nearly half the Head Teachers bought commercial materials. A few of the 62 comments made on this question are shown below. Read Write Inc. was by far the most popular with 37 respondents using it in their schools and 6 using Letters and Sounds and 8 used Jolly Phonics. The rest of the responses were from various other phonics programmes and included some schools that had developed their own materials to supplement commercial packages and suit the needs of the children. One Head commented that *'After the first year of the Phonics Screen Test we bought some sample materials so that children could have the experience of using similar work prior to the actual Phonics Screen.'* Another stated that they bought materials to prepare children for the check *'Scholastic testing materials are used before the test to get the children used to the format.'*

**Question 21: Do you think the check should remain statutory for all children in Year 1?**

180 Head Teachers answered this question and of those, just under 85% did not think that the check should remain statutory for all children.

<b>Q22: Literacy experiences in school and current government literacy policy.</b> <b>In England synthetic phonics is mandated as the only method for teaching children to read.</b>		
Answer Choices	Responses	
Agree	6.11%	11
Agree Somewhat	31.67%	57
Disagree	62.22%	112
	Answered	180
	Skipped	50

73 Comments

Head Teacher responses to question 22 reveal that only 11 (just over 6%) of the Head Teachers ‘agree’ with current government policy and a further 57 ‘agree somewhat’. Of the 180 responses to this question 73 Head Teachers made comments. Most of these comments support the use of phonics as a strategy for the teaching and learning of reading even though the data suggests that they disagree with Government policy. However, many expressed reservations as to the use of phonics as the *only* strategy to teach reading,

As one respondent put it, *‘I have always had a strong approach to phonics as it supports both reading and writing but the emphasis on phonics now is so heavy that it can actually hinder some children’s reading.’* and another Head was concerned that *‘...if they find phonics difficult this could hinder their chances of becoming competent readers.’* Yet another respondent was concerned about attitudes to reading being affected: *‘Although successfully implemented I have continuing doubts as to (the) impact on reading attitudes in children.’*

The overwhelming majority of comments, whilst supporting the use of phonics as a starting point for learning to read, consider that phonics is only one element of the reading process and for children to become successful readers they need to use other strategies and many Heads commented that not all children learn this way. Even those who advocated synthetic phonics as working for the majority of children agreed that this strategy does not work for all children and *‘phonics is just one skill that children need to read...’*. Others made similar comments: *‘For the majority of pupils, it is the right pedagogy but for some it will not work and therefore they need a different approach.’*

Interestingly, many Heads believed that the use of other strategies such as *‘picture cues, context cues, reading on’* should be taught to enable pupils to choose the correct strategy to solve an unknown word. One respondent going on to say, *‘Using phonics to the exclusion of other pedagogy impedes understanding and the development of inference skills.’* This view was repeated in comments from other Heads.

One Head stated that she had only ever taught this way and didn’t know much about alternative methods. Related to this is a quote from another Head who has concerns about the standard of training that student teachers receive in the teaching of reading and the subsequent impact this has on the children they teach. *‘Most importantly we need teachers to be seriously trained in how children learn to read otherwise they do not have the professional judgement and this severely restricts the impact of their teaching on children.’*

A summary of the comments on this question would indicate that although schools are teaching phonics and supporting statutory policy outlined in the National Curriculum (2013) the Head Teachers of these schools also advocate the teaching of other strategies as they consider phonics to be just one skill in the reading process. As one Head put it in answer to this question: *‘If that’s the case how did anyone ever learn to read before this opinion?’*

### **Results of the statistical analyses of data from the Head Teachers’ questionnaires**

We wanted to find out whether there were significant differences in responses to items on the questionnaire between Head Teachers who:

- worked in primary or infant schools;
- had administered the check or had not administered the check;
- were parents of a child who had taken the Phonics Screening Check and those who were not.

Chi-square tests were selected for the analyses because all the data is categorical. There were no significant findings. The views of Head Teachers are not affected significantly by whether or not they are

parents of children who have taken the check, whether they have administered the check themselves, or the kind of school they work in. The majority of Head Teachers disagree with the government's policy on teaching reading, do not think the check should remain statutory, and do not feel that the check provides any additional information on children.

## Conclusions

The results indicate that many Head Teachers:

- Have concerns about the way in which the phonics check is influencing the reading curriculum in Year 1
- Regard the inclusion of pseudo/alien words in the check as unhelpful
- Consider that the check does not give them any information beyond that gleaned from their internal assessments of phonics
- Are aware that phonics is an important strategy in the teaching of reading
- Challenge the notion that phonics is the only strategy to teach reading as not all children learn to read using phonics
- Have concerns that the focus on phonics undermines comprehension
- Support the use of other strategies such as the use of picture cues to teach reading
- Believe that should the Phonics Screening Check remain, not all children should be entered for the check.

Some of the responses to the questionnaire showed contradictions within their responses with some Heads supporting the Phonics Check remaining statutory for all children but not supporting the Government's policy on the teaching of reading. This could provide a basis for further research with focus groups and interviews.

NB A comparison between the commercial schemes recorded in question 20: 'Do you buy commercial synthetic phonics materials or training for your school?' and question 21: 'Do you think the phonics check should remain?' indicated that of the 62 responses, 49 Head Teachers, although willing to invest in commercial materials, were not in favour of the check continuing for all children. However, another respondent who was in favour of the Phonics Screening Check remaining statutory and agreed with current Government policy stated commercial materials '*... are much better value for money than levelled readers.*' Commercial synthetic phonics materials seem to have been bought not only to support the teaching of phonics but also to give test practice, even though most Head Teachers did not think that the Phonics Screening Check should remain statutory. As one Head, who has bought in Read Write Inc. articulated (they buy commercial materials...) '*because we need to meet government targets otherwise we would not*' and added that the teaching of reading '*needs a multi approach as a whole not just barking at print.*'

## Policy Implications

Some of the policy implications which can be identified from Head Teachers' responses:

- 140 of the 180 Head Teachers who responded to question 17 believe that the phonics check is not suitable or necessary for all children in Year 1. This would suggest that Head Teachers feel that the phonics check if it remains should be a voluntary rather than statutory assessment used by schools to further their knowledge of children's phonics ability.
- Schools have their own assessments for phonics and 160 of the 180 Head Teachers who responded to question 15 (see Appendix V) answered that the phonics check did not provide any further information about children's phonics ability. Therefore, any future check should be

designed so that it tells schools more about their children's ability and does not replicate what they already know.

- This study indicates that Head Teachers consider the inclusion of pseudo/alien words in the check is negatively impacting on the teaching of reading and has resulted in many schools teaching to the test. Therefore, the use of pseudo/alien words in any new test should be discontinued.
- The major concern with Head Teachers as shown by the comments received in this survey, is the impact the Phonics Screening Check and the statutory requirements in the National Curriculum are having on the teaching of other reading skills and comprehension. Although many of the Head Teachers who commented agree that phonics is an important part of the teaching of reading, a majority are uneasy about the current focus on phonics and feel that present policy does not reflect how young children learn to read for meaning. This would suggest that policy should be amended to ensure that the reading curriculum is in step with current theory and practice in the teaching and learning of reading.

## Chapter 5 Teachers' Views on the Phonics Screening Check

Susan Atkinson and Jonathan Glazzard

### Introduction

Teachers in England were invited to take part in the independent survey on Survey Monkey. This was widely advertised for four weeks, closing on 25 May 2018. Anyone completing the survey was assured of anonymity. We did supply those who completed the surveys with a secure email address to contact the researchers if they wanted to receive a copy of the report or to be involved in any further stage of the research. To determine the representativeness of our evidence we asked all who completed the surveys to indicate the region in England where they live. We asked teachers how long they had been teaching and whether they were also parents of children who had been assessed on the phonics check.

To look at the questions, it was necessary to open the link and start to answer some of the questions. Some of the incomplete forms may have been by those wishing to see the questions. In all three surveys many, but not all, respondents answered all the questions, and a minority answered only a few questions. We decided we might be criticised for any omissions so decided we should present all the data. However, readers can see just how many of the respondents answered each question and therefore on how many responses we have based any conclusions. The questions and tables with the answers from the teachers are in Appendix VI. It was interesting to note that for several questions 208 respondents did not give an answer and for some questions this rose to 240. However, it is reassuring to note that each question was answered by over 1000 respondents.

We had 1,348 returned forms from teachers, most of whom answered all the questions. Question 1 asked *Where is your school?* Teachers from all regions of England took part with the greatest percentage from the South East (19%), and the fewest from the North East (5.56%) and the East of England (7.20%). Question 2 asked for information about school type. 81% worked in primary schools, with 17% in infant schools. Question 3 asked *For how many years have you taught?* Most teacher respondents had taught between 2 and 20 years (78%), with just over 7% in school for less than 2 years and 14% working for more than 20 years. Question 4 asked *In which year or years have you administered the check?* 27% of these teachers had administered the Phonics Screening Check in 2012, the first year of its implementation, and this rises steadily to 75.59% in 2017. It is reasonable to assume therefore that the majority of these teachers have administered the check more than once. Question 5 asked *To which year groups did you administer the check?* 53.34% administered the check only to children in Year 1, whereas 40.13% had done so in both Years 1 and 2. Question 6 asked teachers to state the total number of children they had assessed on the check. 58.08% of the teachers had assessed 60 or more children on the check. Question 7 asked *Are you also a parent of any children who have sat the Phonics Screening Check?* 23.37% indicated that they had a child who had taken the Phonics Check. This information indicates that the sample of teachers taking part covers the whole of England, and that they are in the main experienced teachers who have administered the Phonics Check at least once. More than three quarters of the sample do not have a child who has taken the Phonics Check.

A summary of the teachers' responses from the questionnaire is presented below. In addition to the questions with multiple choice answers, space was given for comments to several questions: many respondents made use of this. We have included a selection of comments in this chapter.

In summary:

1. All regions in England were represented in the survey of teachers;
2. Most teachers were teaching in primary schools;
3. Nearly half the respondents had taught for between 2 and 10 years;

4. Most of the teachers had assessed children as recently as 2017 and 27% had assessed children in 2012, the first year of the check;
5. Just over half of the respondents had assessed only children in Year 1 and 40.13% had assessed children in Years 1 and 2;
6. More than half of the teachers had assessed 60 or more children;
7. Only 23.37% of the teachers were also parents of children who had been assessed on the check.

Questions 1-7 were answered by all 1348 teachers.

## Results

### ***Question 8. In your school are parents told in advance about the check and its purpose?***

This question was answered by 1140 teachers, 91.14% of the teachers indicated that parents were informed about the check and its purpose.

The table below indicates the teachers' answers to Question 9 and as can be seen most of the teachers stated that they did give preparation for the check.

Q 9. What preparation do you give children for the check? (select all that apply).		
Answer Choices	Responses	
Practice with individual words	96.67%	1102
Practice with pseudo words	97.46%	1111
Assistance from commercial materials	48.16%	549
None	0.53%	6
Other (please specify)	18.86%	215
	<b>Answered</b>	<b>1140</b>
	<b>Skipped</b>	<b>208</b>

There were 215 comments for this question. Comments included:

*'Practice with past papers'*

*'We assess children to see which phonemes they are not secure on and give them interventions to help them learn them in addition to our normal phonics teaching.'*

*'Intervention sessions for those deemed to require it!'*

*'Mock screenings regularly to monitor children's scores, intervention groups, real and nonsense word games.'*

*'Phonics boosting sessions after school.'*

*'Pre-screening with prior test materials.'*

*'Phonics interventions and additional support if not meeting expectations'.*

### ***Question 10. If you use commercial materials, which ones?***

There were 1140 comments for this question. Initial analysis suggests that the most used materials are Twinkl, Phonics Play, Read Write Inc, and online games and activities. However, of the 1,140 teachers who responded to this, 405 indicated that they did not use commercial materials at all.

Q 11. Are parents given guidance on how to prepare their children for the check?		
Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	71.58%	816
No	24.47%	279
Don't know	3.95%	45
If yes, please elaborate.		519
	<b>Answered</b>	<b>1140</b>
	<b>Skipped</b>	<b>208</b>

As can be seen, many of the teachers indicated that they did give parents guidance on preparing their children for the check. In addition, there were 519 comments for this question. The majority of parents are given guidance on how to prepare their children for the phonics check. Initial analysis suggests that information about phonics and the check itself is most common, along with advice on how to read with their child, suggestions for web resources or games to play. Typical comments include:

*'Parents are made aware of the different type of words and can practise them with their child if they wish.'*

*'We advise parents that the check is completed in a discrete way so suggest games they could play at home to support with phonics in l general - not just for the check.'*

*'We encourage parents to read actual books with their children. We want them to enjoy books and read for meaning and pleasure.'*

*'Real and pseudo Words sent home fortnightly to practice.'*

Q 12. Have you observed children affected by the check?		
Answer Choices	Responses	
No	37.02%	422
Yes a few	48.68%	555
Yes many	14.30%	163
If yes in what ways?		533
	<b>Answered</b>	<b>1140</b>
	<b>Skipped</b>	<b>208</b>

There were 533 comments for this question. It is positive that only 14.3% of teachers identified that they had observed many children being affected by the check. However, nearly 63% of teachers identified that they have observed some children being affected, which is a concern. Some comments highlighted the detrimental impacts on more-able children. Comments about the ways in which children are affected are stated below:

*'Children who are competent readers are becoming anxious and tearful over pseudo words.'*

*'Children are stressed. Some cry. It also results in an over use of phonics when reading.'*

*'Reluctant to try. Want to make pseudo words real words.'*



*'More able readers have been upset when not being able to read a made up word as they try to make a real word.'*

*'A few of the more able get frustrated because this is not the way that they read and they constantly try to make real words, even when told that they are nonsense words.'*

*'Children whose parents try and 'prepare' them, have been nervous about 'the test' even though we never mention 'test'.'*

Other comments suggested that children were not affected by the check, although these were in the minority:

*'Why would they be. If it's presented in a non-confrontational way by the teacher, it is only a check-up like all the others we do regularly.'*

*'The children don't know they are taking it so don't worry about it.'*

Q 13. What percentage of the children in Year 1 in your school passed the check in 2012 (the first year of the check)?		
Answer Choices	Responses	
Under 50%	9.39%	107
50-59%	9.82%	112
60-69%	11.58%	132
70-79%	11.75%	134
80-89%	9.91%	113
over 90%	5.18%	59
Don't know	42.37%	483
	<b>Answered</b>	<b>1140</b>
	<b>Skipped</b>	<b>208</b>

Q 14. What percentage of the children in Year 1 in your school passed the check in 2017?		
Answer Choices	Responses	
Under 50%	1.93%	22
50-59%	3.16%	36
60-69%	8.86%	101
70-79%	20.70%	236
80-89%	36.67%	418
over 90%	21.32%	243
Don't know	7.37%	84
	<b>Answered</b>	<b>1140</b>
	<b>Skipped</b>	<b>208</b>

As can be seen, the percentage of children who passed the check was much higher in 2017 than in 2012, the first year of the check. However, 42.37% of the teachers could not remember the percentage pass in 2012.

***Question 15. How many children re-sat the check in 2017?***

This question was answered by 1140 teachers, some indicating that they did not know how many had re-sat the check. In most schools there were few but, in several schools, there were 12 or more children who had to re-sit the check.

***Question 16. Are parents told whether their child passed or failed the check?***

This question was answered by 1140 teachers, 73.86% of whom indicated that the parents were informed in writing, and a further 14.3% of the parents were informed both orally and in writing.

***Question 17. Are parents told their child's actual mark?***

To this question 50.26% responded 'Yes'

***Question 18. Do you think children seem worried after the results of the check are known?***

'No, none worried', was the response by 46.40%, but 20% felt that some children were worried or very worried

***Question 19. Do you feel the phonics check provides you with information on individual children which you did not already have?***

To this question of 1108 teachers who responded 93.59% answered 'No'.

***Question 20. How accurate do you regard the Phonics Screening Check to be in assessment of children's decoding skills?***

This question was answered by 1108 teachers. Only 32 of the teachers regarded it as 'very accurate' and a further 384 regarded it as 'accurate'. However, 46.93% regarded it as 'not very accurate' and a further 15.52% regarded it as not accurate.

***Question 21. Do you feel it is useful to include real and pseudo/alien words in the check?***

As can be seen from the table (see Appendix VI) 79.69% of the teachers did not feel it was useful to include these words and only 20.31% felt it was useful. In addition, there were 298 comments for this question.

The majority response indicated that including both kinds of words is not useful. Some comments highlighted the detrimental impacts of including pseudo words for more-able children. Comments include:

*'We teach children to read for meaning, therefore some children try to make a real word e.g. strom becomes storm.'*

*'It really confuses some children who can decode well!'*

*'Some children can read beyond this level, so their brain automatically tries to correct the pseudo words. The best readers sometimes struggle on the test.'*

*'Our more able children usually attempt to self-correct to a real word as they use their wider reading skills to make sense of what they read.'*

*'Better readers try to turn alien words into similar words that they know are real. To prevent this from happening, children have to be 'trained' in how the test works. This time would be better spent teaching them actual reading skills.'*

*'Alien words serve no purpose for reading skill. Lots of children who are competent readers and sight read really struggle with these.'*

*'I think that they just trip up the good readers who have to be coached into reading them as alien words and not to try and make sense of them as they would normally when they come across a word that they do not immediately recognise.'*

Some comments were supportive:

*'The pseudo words check the blending skill. This does not mean that I personally agree with this.'*

*'Yes, as it tests specific phoneme knowledge.'*

*'Ensures children are using phonic skills and not just sight reading'.*

*'Because you then know how a pupil will decode any new unknown words in a text. If you only do real words you do not know if they are using Synthetic Phonics or memorising words as a whole.'*

*'They provide evidence of an ability to decode.'*

*'Checks secure identification of digraphs and blending.'*

**Question 22. Did you notice any difference in the results on the real and pseudo/alien words?**

To this question 37.55% answered 'Yes'.

**Question 23. Do you think it is useful to record pass/fail on the check?**

To this question 74.73% of the teachers answered 'No'.

**Question 24. Do you think it is useful to re-test children in Year 2 who fail the check in Year 1?**

To this question 74.10% of the teachers answered 'No'.

**Question 25. Has the phonics check affected the way you now teach children to read in your school?**

Of the 1108 teachers who answered this question 33.12% felt it had affected the way they teach children 'A great deal' and there were varied responses to this question. However, there were 481 comments which are more revealing than the multiple-choice answers. More than 60% of respondents feel the phonics check has affected how they teach. The majority feel this has negatively affected how they teach and many comments mentioned 'teaching to the test':

*'Children are now drilled from Foundation to be able to read individual words on flashcards - both real and pseudo. They are given regular 'mock' tests. They are also invited into school for extra 'catch-up' sessions before the start of the school day if it is not thought they will pass.'*

*'Because we have to concentrate so much on 'phonics', reading for meaning, language development, vocabulary all suffer.'*

*'Not in a positive way. Year 1s now just do lots of pseudo words and test preparation, instead of using that time to improve their writing or other useful skills.'*

*'For the negative! We now teach to decode far more and less emphasis is on comprehension and fluency as the test takes up far more of our time to prepare for.'*

*'Huge amounts of time are spent preparing the children for the test and planning and teaching intensive interventions for the children who will not make it. The ones who will pass are just left to get on with it.'*

*'We teach to the test. It's depressing and goes against everything most teachers want to deliver. Reading should be for pleasure, for learning and for life. Subjecting 5-year olds to 'failure' at reading is just crazy. All any good teacher needs to know is where their children are showing gaps in knowledge or understanding of phonics. Teaching children phonics every day for a year and listening to children read gives teachers far more information than this check could ever produce.'*

*'Teach to test. Drill children with nonsense words when we should be teaching the skills of reading of which phonics is just one small element.'*

*'The school feels under pressure to reach the national average results for this and as a result puts pressure on the teachers. Phonics teaching would happen regardless but as the check is nearing more time is spent on decoding rather than further reading skills.'*

But other responses were more positive:

*'It is fantastic. It ensures teachers teach the Phonics part of The Big Five using Systematic Synthetic Phonics. This is essential for literacy skills for ALL pupils'.*

*'I actually understand the evidence and science of how children learn to read and have adjusted my teaching accordingly.'*

*'[We now offer] targeted lessons and intervention groups aimed at covering the phonemes and graphemes'.*

*'Our teaching of phonics is more directed to "plug the gaps" of the sounds individual children don't know. This makes our planning more personalised which can only be a positive thing.'*

**Question 26. The Phonics Screening Check is a statutory assessment of all children in Year 1 and any child who fails to achieve a pass mark of 32 out of 40 is required to re-sit the check in Year 2. What do you think the future of the Phonics Screening Check should be?**

This question was answered by 1,108 teachers, 68.32% of whom thought it should be discontinued (757) and a further 20.04% (222) thought it should become voluntary administered only to some children.

**Question 27. If the check remains statutory should children who fail to achieve a mark of 32 in Year 1 resit the check in Year 2?**

Of the 1108 teachers who answered this question 75.81% answered 'No'. In addition, there were 334 comments.

The majority do not think children should have to re-sit the check. Responses highlighted the detrimental impact that repeating the check has on children's self-esteem and some comments stressed the need to try alternative approaches to reading with the children who did not pass the check in Year 1. Others emphasised the beneficial impact of re-taking the check. Typical comments include:

*'Children who do not pass in Y1 clearly struggle to decode and alien words are not a useful way to identify their difficulties. It causes stress on these children.'*

*'Some children find it very hard to learn phonetically and learn to read in different ways.'*

*'This test does not allow them to succeed.'*

*'If they failed in Year 1, phonics probably does not work for them. They may be better off continuing to learn to read with other strategies that are more suited to them.'*

*'It puts so much pressure on Year 2s, it makes the children feel rubbish that they often have to attend groups with younger children and stops the children from accessing Y2 phonics required for KS1 SATs. The overlap is too much work for both children and staff.'*

*'If the test were to remain, it would make sense to continue the year 2 retest.'*

*'[Yes, it] ensure phonics continues in Y2.'*

*'But not to be published, maybe just keep optional in school.'*

**Question 28. In England synthetic phonics is mandated as the only method for teaching children to read. To what extent do you agree with this government policy?**

Of 1108 who answered this question 42.24% agree somewhat and 47.47% disagree. There were 429 comments for this question.

A mixed response was demonstrated here, evenly split almost between agreeing somewhat and disagreeing with synthetic phonics as the only method for teaching reading. Most comments emphasised the need for teachers to use a broad repertoire of strategies to teach children to read.

*'Synthetic phonics does not work for all. Children need to be exposed to a variety of different methods.'*

*'Phonics is an amazing teaching tool and enables most children to access text successfully from an early age however it does not encompass the full range of reading skills that exist ...'.*

*'I think you should teach phonics in as many different ways as possible and not rely on just one method.'*

*'The phonics lessons should be fun and incorporate different styles to cater for the different learning styles of different children e.g. VAK or SEN such as emerging dyslexia.'*

*'Comprehension skills as important if not more so.'*

*'Some children are only able to learn through sight word knowledge we are doing these children a disservice by continually trying to make them learn phonics.'*

*'We have a nation of children who bark sounds at a page. It discourages reading for meaning and pleasure. More worryingly is now that parents have cottoned on to phonics they encourage their children to sound out EVERYTHING including non- decodable.'*

### **Further analyses**

We wanted to find out whether there were significant differences in responses to items on the questionnaire between teachers who were parents of a child who had taken the phonics screening check and those who were not, and also whether there were differences depending on length of service. The items selected were:

Item 12: Have you observed children stressed during the check?

Item 20: How accurate do you regard the Phonics Screening Check to be in its assessment of children's decoding skills?

Item 21: Do you feel it is useful to include both real and pseudo/alien words in the check?

Item 26: Do you think the Phonics Check should remain statutory, become voluntary or be discontinued?

Item 27: If the Check remains statutory, should children who fail to achieve a mark of 32 in Year 1 resit the Check in Year 2?

Item 28: In England, synthetic phonics is mandated as the only method for teaching children to read. to what extent do you agree with this government policy?

Chi-square tests were selected for the analyses because all the data is categorical.

### **Investigating significant relationships for teachers who are and are not parents of children who have taken the Check**

*Item 28: In England, synthetic phonics is mandated as the only method for teaching children to read. to what extent do you agree with this government policy?*

The percentage of teachers who are parents or not who agree that synthetic phonics should be the only method of teaching reading, agree somewhat or disagree. The majority in each group of teachers (parents and not parents) disagree with having synthetic phonics as the only method of teaching reading, with the fewest agreeing with it. There was no significant relationship between having children who had taken the Check and opinion on synthetic phonics:  $\chi^2=1.322$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p=.516$ , Cramer's  $V=.035$ .

*Item 27: If the Check remains statutory, should children who fail to achieve a mark of 32 in Year 1 resit the Check in Year 2?* The percentage of teachers in each group who said that children should or should not retake the check in Year 2.

The majority in each group of teachers think that children should not have to retake the Check in Year 2. There was no significant relationship between having children who had taken the Check and opinion on retaking the Check:  $\chi^2=.154$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p=.695$ ,  $\phi=.014$ .

*Item 26: Do you think the Phonics Check should remain statutory, become voluntary or be discontinued?* The percentage of teachers in each group who think the phonics check should remain statutory, become voluntary or be discontinued.

The majority of teachers in both groups think the check should be discontinued. There was no significant relationship between having children who had taken the check and opinion on the future of the check:  $\chi^2=1.061$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p=.588$ , Cramer's  $V=.031$ .

*Item 21: Do you feel it is useful to include both real and pseudo/alien words in the check?*

The percentage of teachers in each group (parents and not parents) who feel pseudo words are useful or not. The majority of teachers in both groups feel that pseudo words are not useful in the Phonics Screening Check. There is no significant relationship between the two teacher groups and opinion on pseudo words:  $\chi^2=.070$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p=.792$ ,  $\phi=.011$ .

*Item 20: How accurate do you regard the Phonics Screening Check to be in its assessment of children's decoding skills?*

The majority of teachers in each group (parents and not parents) see the Phonics Screening Check as accurate or not very accurate in assessing decoding skills. There was no significant relationship between teachers with or without children and opinions on the accuracy of the Check:  $\chi^2=3.98$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $p=.264$ , Cramer's  $V=.060$ .

*Item 12: Have you observed children stressed during the check?*

The majority of teachers in both groups (parents and not parents) have observed a few children who were stressed during the Check. There was no significant relationship between the percentage of teachers in each group who observed children who were stressed:  $\chi^2=.744$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p=.69$ , Cramer's  $V=.026$ .

### **Investigating significant relationships for teachers depending on length of service.**

For the following analyses, teachers were grouped according to their length of service: under 2 years, 2-10 years, 11-20 years, and over 20 years.

*Item 12: Have you observed children stressed during the check?*

The majority of teachers in these groups have observed a few children who were stressed during the Check. There was no significant relationship between the percentage of teachers in each group who had observed children who were stressed:  $\chi^2=4.706$ ,  $df=6$ ,  $p=.582$ , Cramer's  $V=.045$ .

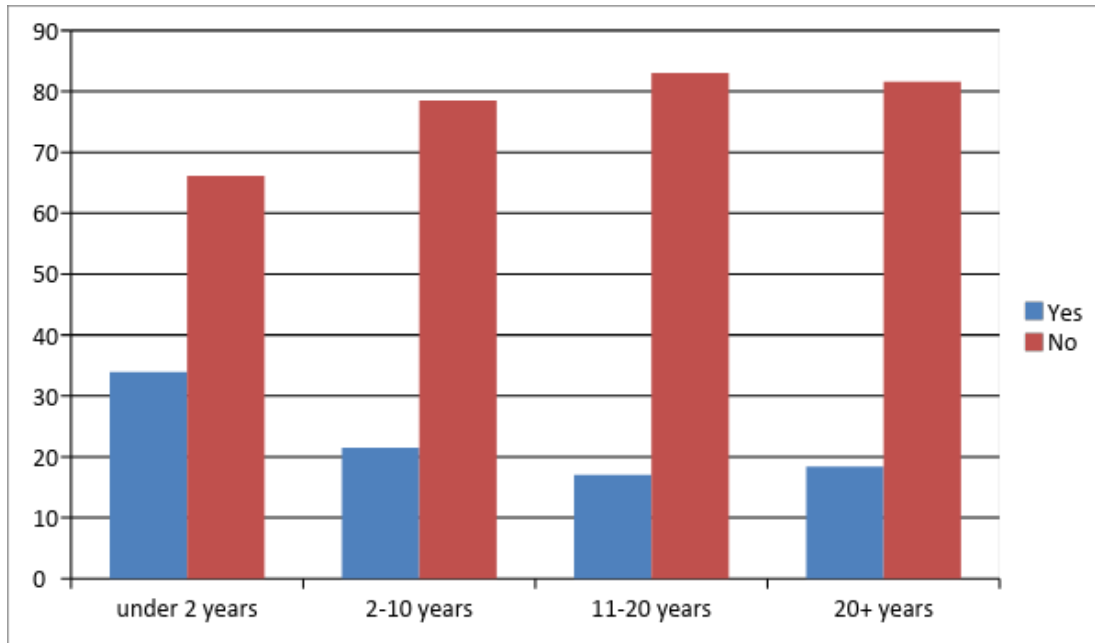
*Item 20: How accurate do you regard the Phonics Screening Check to be in its assessment of children's decoding skills?*

The majority of teachers in each group see the Phonics Screening Check as not very accurate in assessing decoding skills. There was no significant relationship between teachers' length of service and opinions on

the accuracy of the Check:  $\chi^2=8.574$ ,  $df=9$ ,  $p=.477$ , Cramer's  $V=.051$ .

*Item 21: Do you feel it is useful to include both real and pseudo/alien words in the check?*

**Figure 1: The percentage of teachers in each group who feel pseudo words are useful or not**



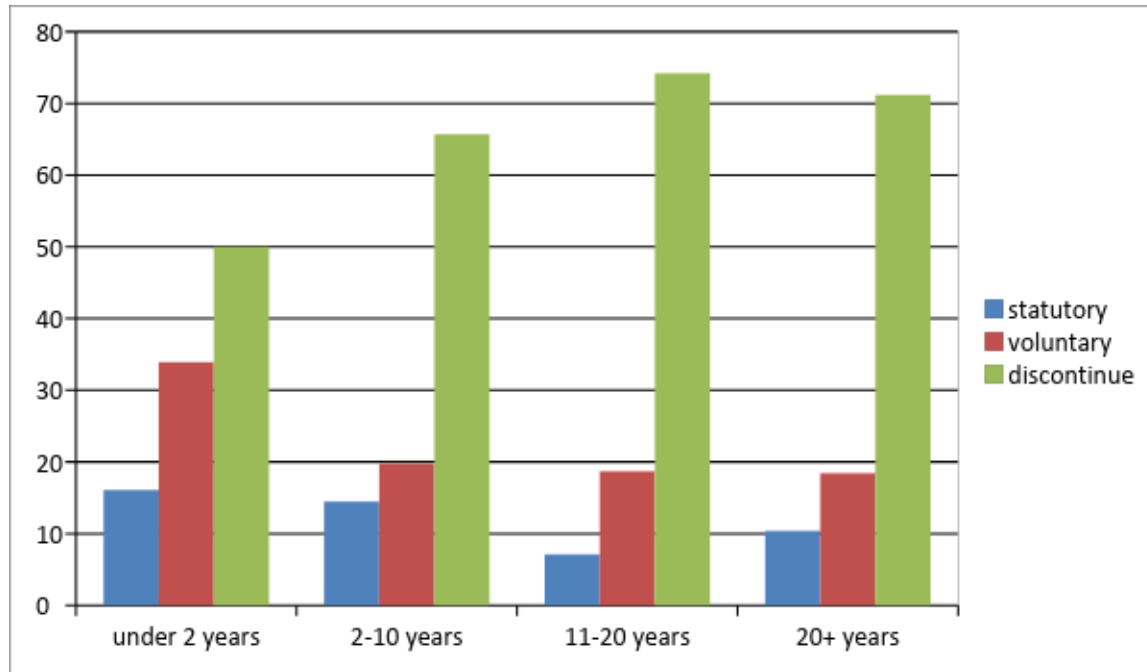
The majority of teachers in all groups feel that pseudo words are not useful in the Phonics Screening Check. **There is a significant relationship** between teacher length of service and opinion on pseudo words:  $\chi^2=10.276$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $p=.016$ , Cramer's  $V=.096$ .

*Item 26: Do you think the Phonics Check should remain statutory, become voluntary or be discontinued?*



Figure 2 shows the percentage of teachers in each group who think the phonics check should remain statutory, become voluntary or be discontinued.

**Figure 2: The percentage of teachers in each group who think that the Phonics Check should remain statutory, become voluntary or be discontinued**



It can be seen that the majority of teachers in all groups think the check should be discontinued. **There is a significant relationship** between length of service and opinion on the future of the check:  $\chi^2=23.43$ ,  $df=6$ ,  $p=.001$ , Cramer's  $V=.103$ .

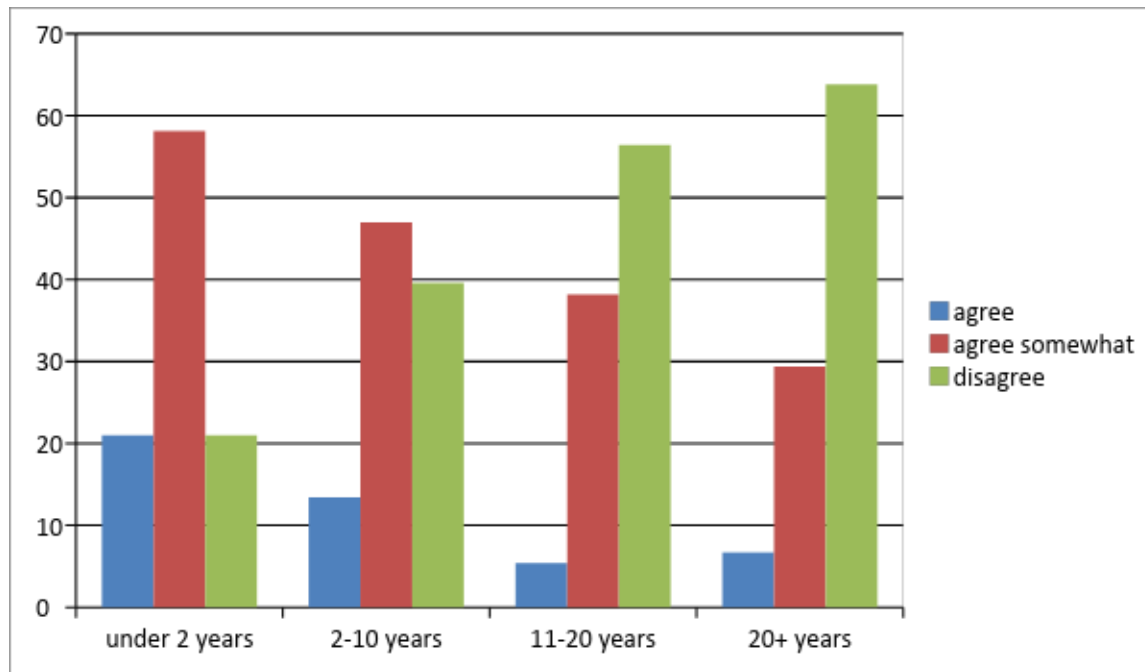
*Item 27: If the Check remains statutory, should children who fail to achieve a mark of 32 in Year 1 resit the Check in Year 2?*

The majority in each group of teachers think that children should not have to retake the Check in Year 2. There was no significant relationship between length of service and opinion on retaking the Check:  $\chi^2=1.74$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $p=.628$ , Cramer's  $V=.04$ .

*Item 28: In England, synthetic phonics is mandated as the only method for teaching children to read. to what extent do you agree with this government policy?*

Figure 3 shows the percentage of teachers in each group who agree that synthetic phonics should be the only method of teaching reading, agree somewhat or disagree.

**Figure 3: The percentage of teachers in each group who agree with synthetic phonics, agree somewhat or disagree**



It can be seen that the majority of teachers who have been teaching under 2 years or for 2 to 10 years 'agree somewhat' with having synthetic phonics as the only method of teaching reading, whereas the majority of those teaching for more than 10 years disagree with it as the only method. **There is a significant relationship** between length of service and opinion on synthetic phonics:  $\chi^2=67.34$ ,  $df=6$ ,  $p<.0005$ , Cramer's  $V=.174$ .

## Conclusions

Initial analysis of the data indicated that:

- Most teachers provided parents with guidance to help them to prepare their children for the phonics check;
- There is evidence that teachers have witnessed some children becoming stressed during the implementation of the phonics check;
- Most teachers did not feel it was useful to include the teaching of pseudo words;
- Many teachers felt the phonics check had impacted on how they approach the teaching of reading;
- Most teachers felt that the phonics check should be discontinued;
- Most teachers felt that children who fail the phonics check in Year 1 should not be required to re-sit the check in Year 2
- 47.47% of teachers disagreed with government policy which promotes the teaching of synthetic phonics as the only method of teaching children to read.

Further statistical analyses indicated that:

- There are no statistically significant differences on any of the items selected between teachers who have children who have taken the Check and those who have not. This suggests that the experience of having a child taking the Check does not affect teacher opinions on the value of the Check or of synthetic phonics.
- **There are significant differences** on 3 of the items when teachers are grouped by length of service:
  - The usefulness of pseudo words in the Check: all teachers feel they are not useful, but the longer someone has worked as a teacher, the more likely they are to rate them as not useful.
  - The future of the Check: again, the majority of teachers in each group would prefer to see the check discontinued, but the percentage choosing this option increases with length of service up to 20 years, when it declines slightly.
  - Synthetic phonics as the only approved method of teaching reading: the majority of teachers with under 10 years' service agreed somewhat with this policy, indicating that they have some reservations about synthetic phonics as the only approach. However, an increasing majority of those teaching more than 10 years disagreed with the policy. We can assume that these teachers have had training and experience in using other methods as well as synthetic phonics to teach reading and can see the value of using a combination of approaches to teach children to read.

## Policy Implications

Following our analysis of the data we are able to identify some key policy implications:

1. The views expressed by the teachers who responded to this questionnaire, indicate that the government should seriously consider either discontinuing the phonics check or making it voluntary. If the check is to be continued, then children who fail it in Year 1 should not, according to many of these teachers, be required to re-sit it in Year 2; this could be an optional decision which schools make. Most teachers who responded to the survey do not agree with the inclusion of pseudo words within the check, stressing the effect of these on their practice in the early years including on children who can already read. Thus, it should be seriously considered whether to remove these if the check is to be continued.
2. Most teachers reported that they had witnessed some children becoming stressed during the implementation of the check. If it is to be continued, consideration might be given to it becoming a formative tool only to support teachers in planning to address individual needs.
3. The use of Phonics Screening Check data as a benchmark to measure overall school improvement appeared to be regarded as unhelpful by many. Additionally, the emphasis given to the pass rates in Ofsted inspections was not felt to be helpful. It appears that the 'high-stakes' status of the check results may place pressure on teachers which is passed down onto children, resulting in some becoming stressed.
4. Given the proportion of these teachers who disagree with government policy (47.47%) the government should consider a broad repertoire of approaches for teaching children to read. The Teachers' Standards in England currently require all trainee teachers and teachers to 'demonstrate a clear understanding of systematic synthetic phonics' (TS3). The inclusion of synthetic phonics within the Teachers' Standards makes this method of teaching reading mandatory. In the light of these results government should consider amending this so that it emphasises the role of synthetic

phonics within a broad range of approaches for teaching children to read rather than as the only method of teaching reading to all children.

5. The response to this survey by teachers, to the multiple-choice questions, and the detailed comments they added to many questions, suggests that they are concerned about current literacy policy. Thus, surely it would be valuable for the government to involve teachers who have assessed children on the check and Head Teachers in discussion on the future of both the Phonics Screening Check and the current mandatory requirement that the only method of teaching reading should be by synthetic phonics. The lack so far of any attempt by government to undertake any such consultation and to seek the views of practitioners was the reason for us to undertake this independent survey (see Appendix I).

## **Chapter 6 The Views of Parents on the Phonics Screening Check**

**John Bayley**

### **Introduction**

Links to an independent survey on Survey Monkey were widely advertised for four weeks closing on 25 May 2018. One of these links was for parents in England any of whose children had been assessed on the statutory Phonics Screening Check. Anyone completing the survey was assured of anonymity. We did supply those who completed the surveys with a secure email address at which they could contact us should they wish to receive a copy of the report or to be involved in any further stage of the research. To determine the representativeness of our evidence we did ask all who completed the surveys to indicate the region in England where they live. We asked Head Teachers and teachers how long they had been teaching and whether they were also parents of children who had been assessed on the check. Parents were asked if they were teachers involved in assessing children on the check as we thought this might influence opinions.

In order to look at the questions it was necessary to open the link and start to answer some of the questions. In all three surveys many but not all respondents answered all the questions, and a minority answered only a few questions. We thought we might be criticised for any omissions so decided we should present all the data. However, readers can see just how many of the respondents did answer each question and therefore on how many responses we have based any conclusions.

We had 419 returned forms from parents, but as can be seen below most of our evidence is based on the answers by about 300 parents. Our sample is as follows:

1. There are parents from all regions of England.
2. Most of the children were in primary schools.
3. Only about half those who replied had seen the check.
4. Some are themselves teachers who have assessed children on the check.
5. Most forms were completed by the mother.
6. About half these parents' children had passed the check.
7. English was the mother tongue of all but a tiny minority of these children.
8. There were children who had sat the check in any of the years from 2012 to 2017.
9. Some parents had more than one child who had sat the check.

Parents with more than one child who had been assessed were asked to complete the survey for their child who had been assessed on the check most recently. They were invited to contact the researchers on the dedicated email address if the experience of their other children had been very different and they wished to discuss this with the researchers. The high number of these children who had passed the check could partly have been explained by the fact that the percentage pass has risen steeply and is high in 2017 when many of them sat the check.

We were disappointed that in spite of our effort we were able to reach very few parents whose child's mother tongue was not English. Thus, it should be noted that these views are mainly those of mothers, many with children who passed the check and nearly all with English as their first language. The views of these parents are nonetheless valuable. We would welcome the opportunity to add evidence of the views of more parents whose children failed the check and were required to re sit it in Year 2 and parents whose children had a limited command of English when they were assessed.

A summary of the parents' responses based on the survey monkey analysis is presented below. In addition to the questions with multiple choice answers, space was given for comments to several questions. Many respondents availed themselves of this opportunity.

Some of the more interesting responses to questions on the parents' survey are as follows:

***Q10: Is your child fluent in English?***

Answered: 7 Skipped: 412

5 answered Yes, 2 answered No

***Q13: Were you informed in advance about the check?***

Answered: 338 Skipped: 81

66 had been informed orally, 84 in writing, 128 both orally and in writing, and 60 had not been informed.

***Q14: Were you asked to prepare your child in any way for the check?***

Answered: 338 Skipped: 81

137 respondents answered Yes, and 170 answered No

***Q15: In what ways were you asked to prepare your child? (select all that apply)***

Answered: 157 Skipped: 262

111 respondents stated that they had been asked to practise individual words, and 128 stated that they had been asked to practise pseudo words.

***Q16 If you bought any materials to help, do you remember the name of the materials? If so please indicate.***

Answered: 316 Skipped: 103

The majority of parents indicated that they had not purchased any materials to help with the check, with one parent taking the opportunity to state: *'The test is a waste of time, so I did what any good parent did [sic] and just help them to read properly.'* Another parent commented: *'I didn't buy anything. At the age of 5/6 I don't believe in putting pressure on children.'* Two parents stated that they did not know that the phonics check was happening. A number of parents had used online materials, including practice tests from the government website, and some had resources provided by the school. Materials that were purchased include Read Write Inc, and Oxford Owl.

***Q17: Did any aspects of the Phonics Screening Check affect your child?***

Answered: 316 Skipped: 103

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Don't know	17.41%	55
No	53.16%	168
Yes	29.43%	93
TOTAL		316

It is important to note that this is a neutrally phrased question, and whilst 168 parents stated that it had not affected their child, and 55 did not know, only two parents made positive comments about the check.

However, 93 parents took the opportunity to comment on what they perceived as negative effects that the Phonics Screening Check had on their child. This should be of concern to all involved.

One concern was over anxiety/stress/worry (three frequently used words in the responses) felt by the children. One parent stated that her/his child had had sleepless nights, and another indicated that the child was worried that s/he would *'get in trouble at school if they did it wrong.'* One parent complained that *'He [the child] was stressed about it and worried he was going to fail.'*

The use of 'pseudo' or 'alien' words was another frequently cited issue, as many parents identified that they had caused confusion. One parent, for example, commented that her child was praised for reading alien words correctly to the point where she (the child) thought she was reading real words. This sense of confusion was compounded where children tried to make pseudo words into 'real' words, a factor identified by many parents. This was especially the case where parents identified their child as a 'good' reader, who, perhaps not surprisingly, was attempting to make sense of these words. This might best be summed up by one parent's response: *'Found it frustrating to read alien words as she didn't know if they sound correct, as unknown...she had to look to adult for reassurance.'* It would be interesting to know the thinking behind the use of such pseudo words as a means of assessing children's reading, especially as one parent said of the child: *'The alien words became part of her language.'* We know, of course, that many words in English are not spelled phonetically correctly, as was recognised by one parent, who stated: *'I feel my child now spells a lot of words phonetically which is difficult when many words in the English language do not follow this rule.'*

Failure in the Phonics Screening Check clearly had a negative effect on the self-esteem of some children. One child failed the test in Year 1, and had intervention in Year 2, and the parent identified that she (the child) *'presents with anxiety'*. Another parent had strong opinions here, stating: *'Yes, he failed so he said he was thick! Disgusting way to kill a kid's confidence off'*. One parent, whose son had speech problems, was concerned that he *'felt pressured to keep repeating words knowing he won't be able to say it, no matter how many times he tries'*. Another parent (of a child who twice failed the check) stated that *'Despite attempts to minimise stress, my child's anxieties increased and behaviour deteriorated'*. A further case was where the child had to retake the check in Year 2, *'.... though she was a good non-phonetic led reader'*, and this resulted in her *'not expecting books to make sense because of the over practice of nonsense/alien words'*. Yet another child *'Became convinced he was not a reader and no good, as he was one of the only ones who failed the test.'*

Some parents of children who were fluent readers expressed concern that their children were bored, or that it was a waste of time for them to take the Phonics Screening Check. A typical comment was *'Waste of lesson time repeating alien words and practising for the test'*. Another was that *'...it had a negative impact [on] reading for enjoyment'*. Another parent complained that her child *'...was a fluent reader and it made her reading slow and stilted for a while because she was told to sound everything out. She did not need to'*. Yet another parent said that their child was *'.... utterly bored of phonics and it made her less happy to go to school.'* This might all be summarised in the response of one parent: *'[The check] took up time that would have been better spent on actual reading!'* This is supported by the comment of another parent, who stated: *'My child found it boring and there was far too much preparation for it beforehand, in my opinion (two 20-minute phonic sessions daily).'*

There were only two positive comments in response to this question, one of which suggested that the *'emphasis on phonics helped him to become a good reader,'* and the other stated that the child *'loved individual time with the teacher and reading funny words.'*

**Q20: Were you informed what mark your child received?**

Answered: 314 Skipped: 105

161 parents stated that they had been informed in writing, 36 orally, and 31 both orally and in writing. 86 parents were not informed.

***Q23: How well could this child read at the time of the check?***

Answered: 304 Skipped: 115

242 parents stated that their child could already read with understanding, 48 said that their child could read a few words, 13 stated that their child could recognise most letters of the alphabet.

The responses to this question raise the issue of what purpose the Phonics Screening Check serves, given that the majority of parents indicate that their child can already read with understanding (see also the responses to Q25 (below)).

***Q25: Is he or she reading with understanding now?***

Answered: 302 Skipped: 117

290 respondents answered Yes, whilst 12 answered No.

***Q29: The Phonics Screening Check is statutory for all children in Year 1 and to be re-taken by all children in Year 2 who fail to gain a mark of 32 out of 40. Do you think the check should remain statutory?***

Answered: 298 Skipped: 121

40 replied Yes, for all children, 16 replied Yes, for some children, 55 said it should be voluntary, and 187 said that it should be discontinued.

***Q32: To what extent do you agree with current government literacy policy?***

Answered: 295 Skipped: 124

17 parents agreed with government literacy policy, 84 agreed somewhat, 165 disagreed, and 29 did not know. It is interesting (though not unexpected) that parents who reported that their children were affected by the check were more likely to be negative about government policy. This applies equally to those parents whose children failed the check – again, perhaps not surprisingly).

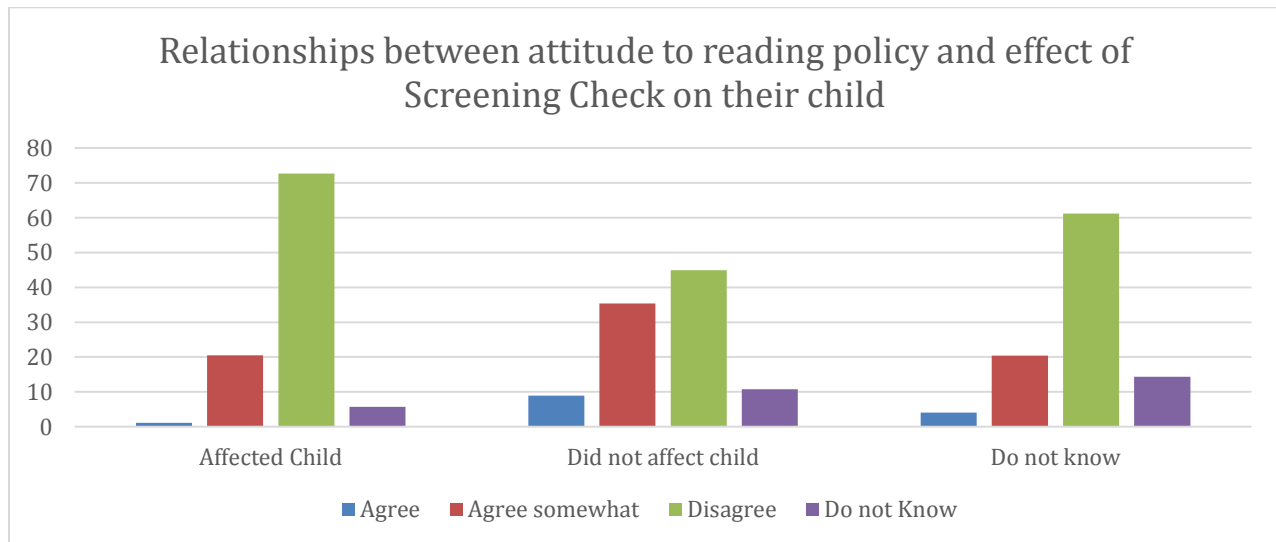
**Further analysis**

Detailed statistical analysis revealed some significant findings. We wanted to find out whether there were significant differences in responses to items on the questionnaire between groups of parents. Chi-square tests were selected for the analyses because all the data is categorical. Only the statistically significant results are reported here.



**Figure 1:**

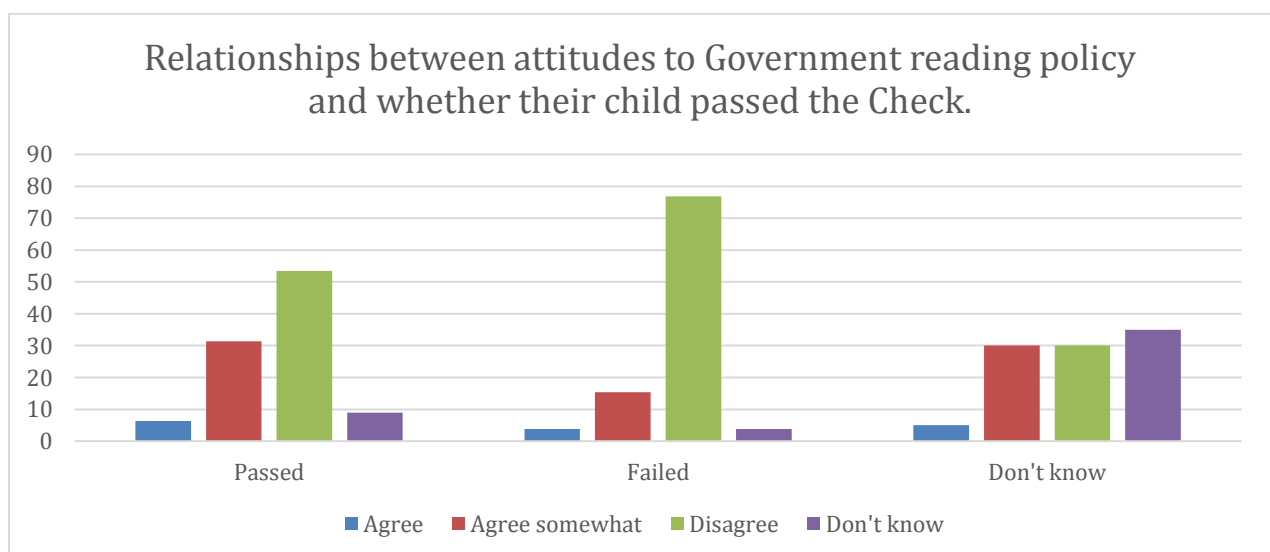
Figure 1 shows the percentage of parental responses grouped by attitude to the government's reading policy (agree, agree somewhat, disagree, don't know) and by whether the Phonics Screening Check affected their child (affected their child, did not affect child, do not know).



It can be seen that the majority in each group disagrees with the government's policy on teaching reading. Parents whose child was affected by the check are more negative about the policy on reading. There is a significant relationship between whether the child was affected by the check and parental attitude to government reading policy:  $\chi^2=22.71$ ,  $df=6$ ,  $p=.001$ , Cramer's  $V=.196$ .

**Figure 2:**

Figure 2 shows the percentage of parental responses grouped by attitude to the government's reading policy (agree, agree somewhat, disagree, don't know) and by whether their child passed the Phonics Screening Check (passed, failed, do not know).

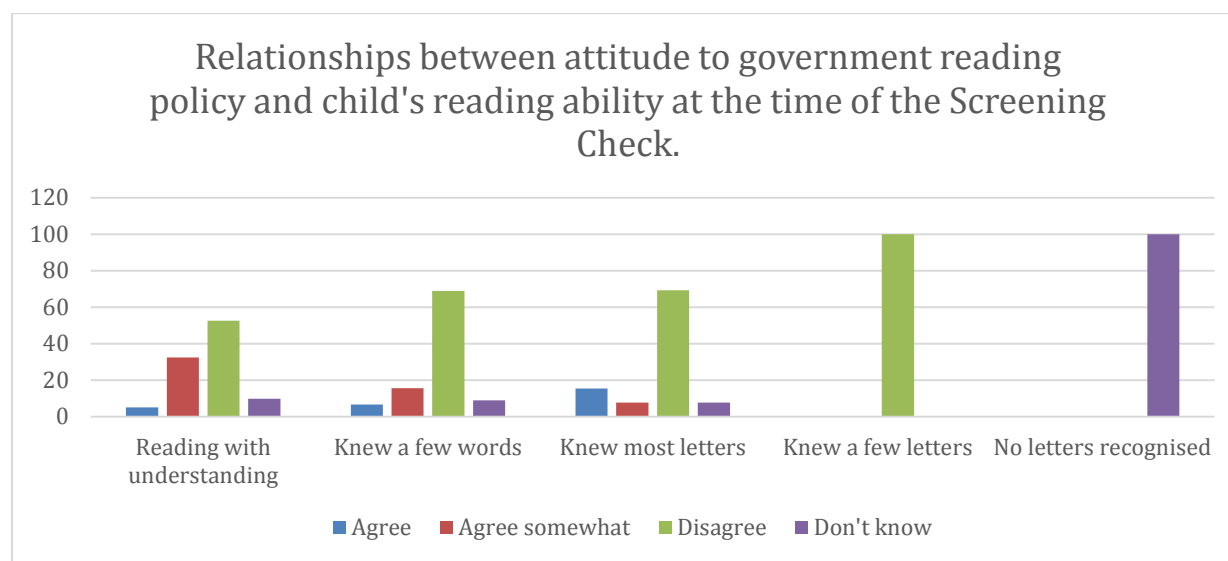


It can be seen that the majority in each group whose child passed or failed the check disagrees with the government's policy on teaching reading. Parents whose child failed the check are more negative about

the policy on reading. There is a significant relationship between whether the child passed the check and parental attitude to government reading policy:  $\chi^2=25.981$ ,  $df=6$ ,  $p<.0005$ , Cramer's  $V=.210$ .

**Figure 3:**

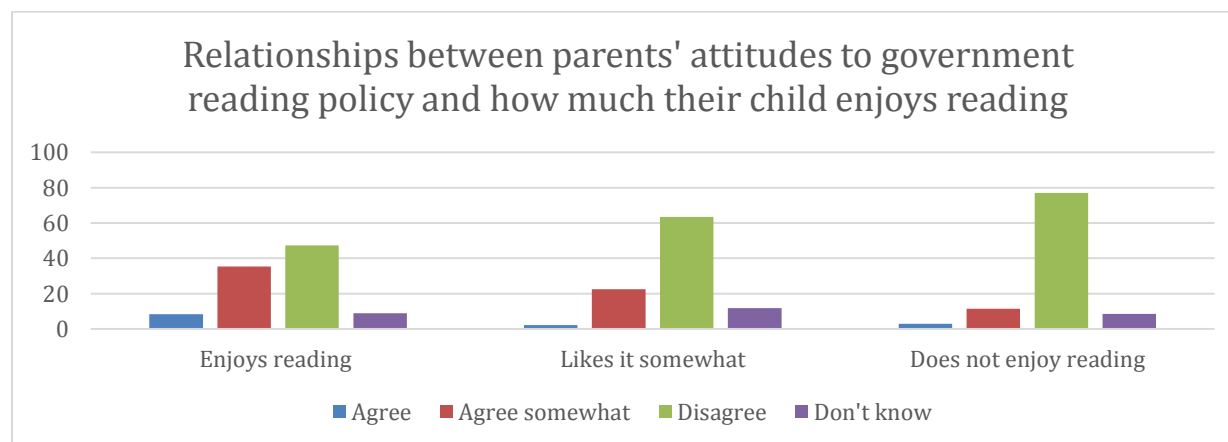
Figure 3 shows the percentage of parental responses grouped by attitude to the government's reading policy (agree, agree somewhat, disagree, don't know) and by how well their child was reading at the time of the Phonics Screening Check (reading with understanding, knew a few words, knew most of the letters, knew a few letters, no letters recognised).



It can be seen that the majority in each group disagrees with the government's policy on teaching reading. The percentage who disagree increases as reading ability decreases. There is a significant relationship between the child's reading ability and parental attitude to government reading policy:  $\chi^2=21.328$ ,  $df=12$ ,  $p=.046$ , Cramer's  $V=.155$ . This is the most marginal of the significant results.

**Figure 4:**

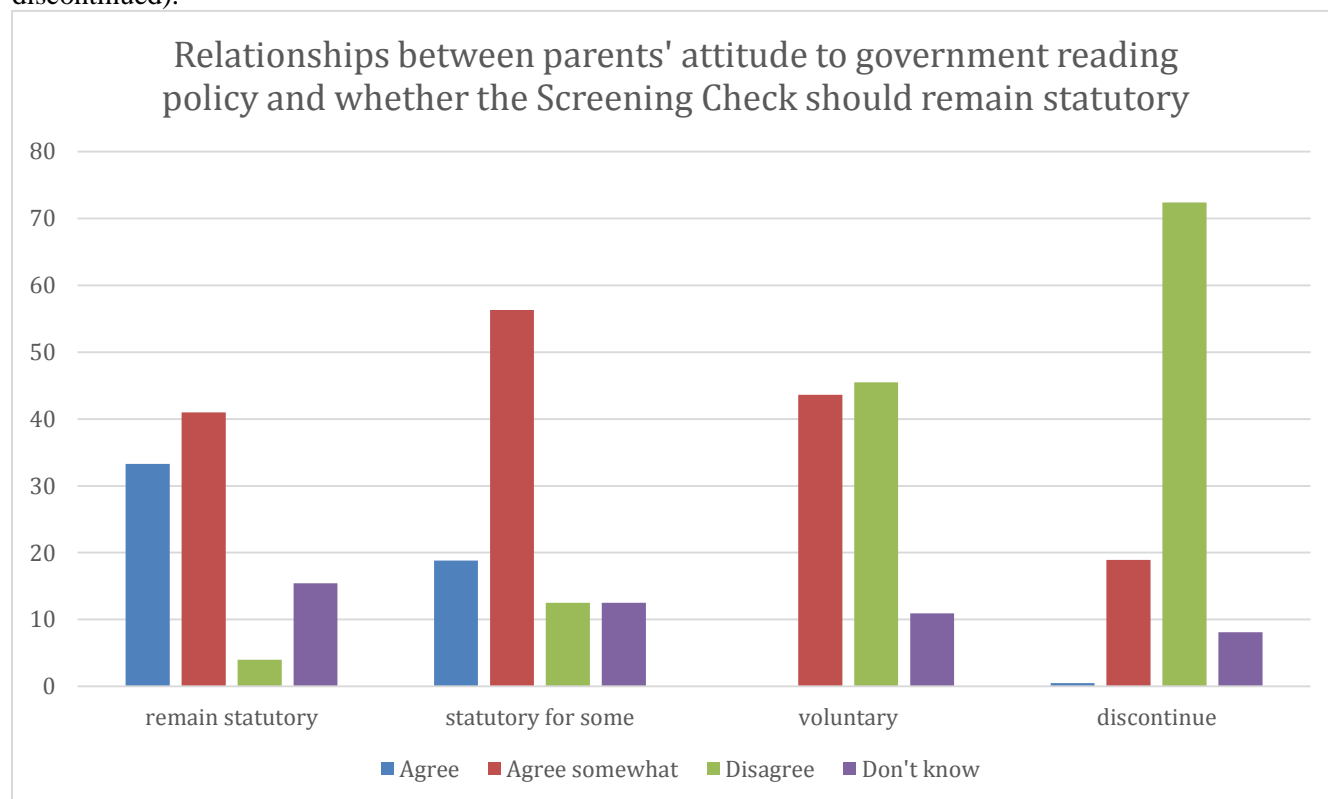
Figure 4 shows the percentage of parental responses grouped by attitude to the government's reading policy (agree, agree somewhat, disagree, don't know) and by whether their child enjoys reading (enjoys reading, likes it somewhat, does not enjoy reading).



It can be seen that the majority in each group disagrees with the government's policy on teaching reading. The percentage of parents in each group who disagree with the policy increases the less their child enjoys reading. There is a significant relationship between whether the child enjoys reading and parental attitude to government reading policy:  $\chi^2=18.601$ ,  $df=6$ ,  $p=.005$ , Cramer's  $V=.178$ .

**Figure 5:**

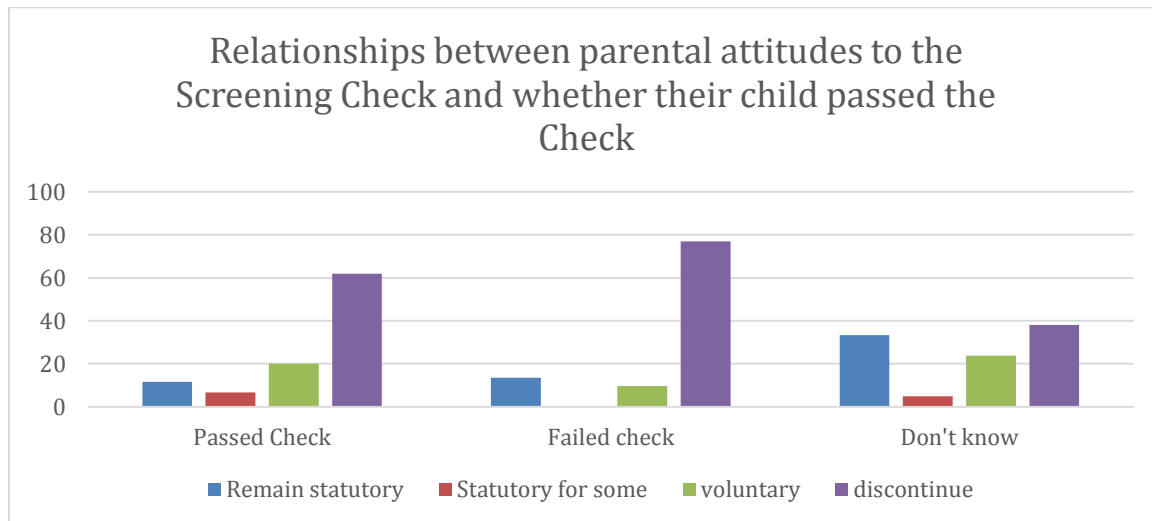
Figure 5 shows the percentage of parental responses grouped by attitude to the government's reading policy (agree, agree somewhat, disagree, don't know) and by opinion on whether the Phonics Screening Check should remain statutory (remain statutory for all, remain statutory for some, become voluntary, be discontinued).



Parents who feel that the Phonics Screening Check should remain statutory for all or some children are more likely to agree or agree somewhat with the government's reading policy. Parents who feel that it should become voluntary or be discontinued are more likely to disagree with the government's reading policy. There is a significant relationship between views on whether the check should remain statutory and parental attitude to government reading policy:  $\chi^2=116.907$ ,  $df=9$ ,  $p<.0005$ , Cramer's  $V=.363$ .

**Figure 6:**

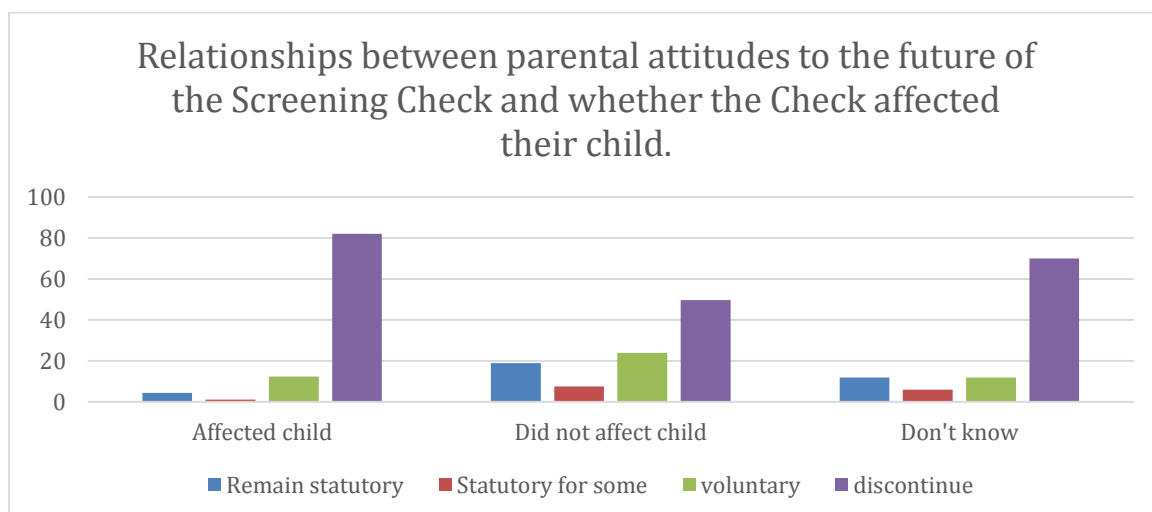
Figure 6 shows the percentage of parental responses grouped by attitude to the Phonics Screening Check (remain statutory for all, remain statutory for some, become voluntary, be discontinued) and by whether their child passed the check in Year 1 (passed, failed, do not know).



The majority of parents in each group felt that the check should be discontinued, with the highest percentage giving this opinion if their child had failed the check. There is a significant relationship between whether the child passed the check and parental attitude to the Phonics Screening Check:  $\chi^2=16.85$ ,  $df=6$ ,  $p=.01$ , Cramer's  $V=.168$ .

**Figure 7:**

Figure 7 shows the percentage of parental responses grouped by attitude to the future of the Phonics Screening Check (remain statutory for all, remain statutory for some, become voluntary, be discontinued) and by whether the Phonics Screening Check affected their child (affected their child, did not affect child, do not know).



The greatest percentage in each group thought that the Phonics Screening Check should be discontinued. This view was most prevalent amongst parents whose child had been affected by the check. There is a

significant relationship between whether the child was affected by the check and parental attitude to the future of the Phonics Screening Check:  $\chi^2=28.788$ ,  $df=6$ ,  $p<.0005$ , Cramer's  $V=.220$ .

### Figure 8:

Figure 8 shows the percentage of parental responses indicating how well their child could read at the time of the check (reading with understanding, could read a few words, knew most letters, knew a few letters, recognized no letters) and whether their child passed the check in Year 1 (passed, failed, don't know).

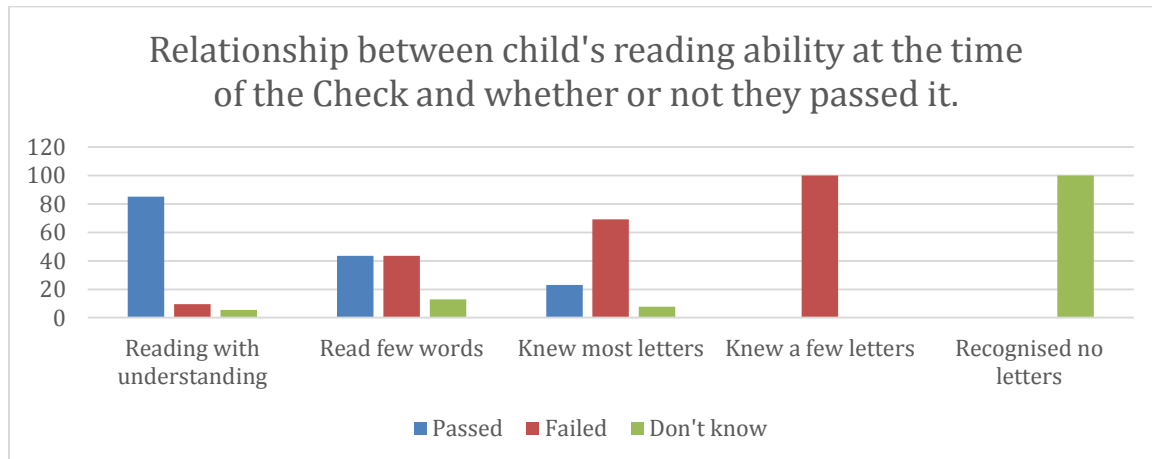


Figure 8 indicates that the majority of children who were reading with understanding at the time of the check passed the check, whereas those who could read a few words stood an equal chance of passing or failing. Children who knew a few or most letters were more likely to fail the check. There is a significant relationship between the child's reading ability and whether they passed the Phonics Screening Check:  $\chi^2=85.873$ ,  $df=8$ ,  $p<.0005$ , Cramer's  $V=.376$ .

### Conclusions

Initial findings indicated that:

- Most parents did not buy materials to support their child for the Phonics Screening Check.
- Most parents did not feel that the Phonics Screening Check had an effect on their child.
- Some parents felt that the inclusion of pseudo words caused confusion.
- Some parents felt that the Phonics Screening Check had an adverse effect on their child's confidence and self-esteem.
- The great majority of parents in the survey do not agree that all children should take the Phonics Screening Check, nor do they agree with government literacy policy.

Complex analysis revealed several significant findings. Parents are more likely to disagree with the Phonics Screening Check and government policy on teaching reading if their child has been affected by the check, does not enjoy reading, has failed the check or could not read well at the time of the check. In itself, this is not surprising: feeling that your child is failing at the beginning of their school career must be very hard for parents to manage, particularly if their child is also distressed. What is surprising is that so many of the parents whose children were reading well, enjoyed reading, or who had passed the check still expressed negative attitudes towards government policy and the check. There is also a very strong significant association between the child's reading ability at the time of the check and whether they passed the check.

### Policy implications

At this preliminary stage it is possible to identify some policy implications.

1. The government might consider withdrawing the Phonics Screening Check, in response to the views of the majority of parents in the survey.
2. Some of the views expressed by parents who responded to this questionnaire agree with those of teachers and headteachers in that the use of pseudo words is confusing, and that, therefore, the government should consider discontinuing the use of these.
3. Some parents indicated that the Phonics Screening Check had an adverse effect on their child's confidence and self-esteem; the government might consider the use of formative assessment by teachers in this area.
4. In response to some parents' concerns, the government might consider whether the check is suitable for some children with disabilities.

## **Chapter 7 The findings of the survey: their implications and limitations**

**Margaret M. Clark and Jonathan Glazzard**

### **Background**

In July 2018 we published online a preliminary report of the findings of our independent survey. The aim of the enquiry was to give a voice to the views of Head Teachers, teachers who have assessed children on the Phonic Screening Check between 2012 and 2017 and parents whose children have been assessed. Here we present the final report of the enquiry following further analyses, mainly by Susan Atkinson. Chapter 1 has been revised, there is a new chapter 2 presenting complementary research by others updated to 2018. The plan for the study is in chapter 3 and our findings on the views of the Head Teachers, teachers and parents are in chapters 4, 5 and 6. In Appendices V, VI and VII the questions asked, the numbers of respondents who answered each question and tables with their answers are to be found. Many respondents in addition made comments in response to several of the questions; the numbers who commented are also shown in the appendices. We have added a summary of the further analyses to each of these appendices.

Information about the survey was widely distributed in England together with links to the three survey forms, one for Head Teachers of schools where children had been assessed on the check, another for teachers who had assessed children, the third for parents any of whose children had been assessed (see Appendix IV). The survey closed on 25 May 2018. Those who completed the survey were assured of anonymity. They were offered the opportunity of contacting the researchers on a secure email address should they wish to make any further comments or to be involved in any future aspect of the research. Parents who had more than one child who had been assessed on the check were asked to complete the form for the child most recently assessed. It was thought that some of these parents might have valuable insights if the experience of their other children had been very different. Other teachers and parents might wish to give more detailed comments than was possible within the constraints of the online survey. We have been contacted by a number of respondents wishing to receive a copy of the report or interested to collaborate further. We acknowledged these emails, informing them that the preliminary report was available and that we will contact them if we plan any further aspect of the research.

We had forms returned from all regions of England. We had 230 forms returned by Head Teachers, most with over ten years' experience of teaching, the majority had themselves administered the check. We had 1,348 forms returned by teachers, many of whom had assessed 60 or more children. Of the teachers 23% were parents of children who had been assessed on the check. Forms were returned by 419 parents, most completed by the mother. Only about half of these parents had seen the check, and 27% of the parents were teachers who had themselves administered the check. The check had been passed in Year 1 by 75% of the children, about half of the children having sat the check in 2017. Some of these parents had more than one child who had sat the check (29%). Our information is for the child who sat it most recently, and the percentage pass on the check has risen over the years. Nineteen of these parents reported that their child spoke two or more languages. Unfortunately, we reached few parents whose home language is not English. A wider sample of parents would add an important further dimension and these children might have more difficulty with the check than those on whom we are reporting here. Not all respondents answered all questions, however, the percentages we quote here are based on the answers by at least 180 Head Teachers, 1108 teachers and 295 parents.

### **The views of the Head Teachers (see chapter 4 and Appendix V)**

The summary below is based on the responses of 180 Head Teachers. For that reason, we decided to give numbers expressing the views rather than percentages.

Initial analysis of the Head Teacher survey indicated that:

- 160 of the Head Teachers do not believe the check provides them with information on individual children they do not already have;
- 127 of the Head Teachers do not think pass/fail should be recorded on the check;
- 144 of the Head Teachers believe the alien/pseudo words are not useful;
- 115 of the Head Teachers do not think it is useful for children who fail to re-sit the check;
- 152 of the Head Teachers do not think the check should remain statutory;
- 58 of the Head Teachers reported that the check had affected how they now teach children to read a great deal and a further 71 responded 'somewhat';
- Only 11 of the Head Teachers expressed agreement with current government literacy policy of synthetic phonics as the only way of teaching children to read, a further 57 agree somewhat and 112 disagree (73 commenting on their reasons).

Despite these views, 82 of the Head Teachers have bought synthetic phonics commercial materials or training (62 commenting on their reasons). Head Teachers acknowledged that whilst phonics is an important strategy in the teaching of reading a variety of approaches should be used to support reading development.

Complex analysis showed no significant relationships. The views of Head Teachers are not affected significantly by whether they are parents of children who have taken the check, whether they have administered the check themselves, or the kind of school they work in. The majority of Head Teachers disagree with the government's policy on teaching reading, do not think the check should remain statutory, and do not feel that the check provides any additional information on children.

### **The views of the teachers (see chapter 5 and Appendix VI)**

The summary below is based on the views of 1108 teachers and for that reason we have quoted percentages.

Initial analysis of the teacher survey indicated that:

- 94% of the teachers do not believe the check provides them with information on individual children they do not already have;
- 75% of the teachers do not think pass/fail should be recorded on the check;
- 80% of the teachers believe the alien/pseudo words are not useful;
- 74% of the teachers do not think it is useful for children who fail to re-sit the check;
- 12% of the teachers think the check should remain statutory while 68% think it should be discontinued;
- 33% of the teachers reported that the check had affected how they now teach children to read 'a great deal' and a further 38% responded 'somewhat';
- 10% of teachers expressed agreement with current government literacy policy of synthetic phonics as the only way of teaching children to read, a further 42% 'agree somewhat' and 47% 'disagree' (429 commenting on their reasons).

Only six teachers reported that they did not prepare children for the check. The others listed a variety of ways, with 97% including practicing pseudo words and 48% using commercial synthetic phonics commercial (215 commenting on their reasons). Most teachers acknowledged that whilst phonics is an important strategy in the teaching of reading a variety of approaches should be used to support reading development.

Complex analysis revealed some statistically significant relationships. There are no statistically significant differences on any of the items selected between teachers who have children who have taken the check and those who have not. This suggests that the experience of having a child taking the check



does not affect teachers' opinions on the value of the check or of synthetic phonics. However, there are significant differences on three of the items when teachers are grouped by length of service:

- The usefulness of pseudo words in the check: all teachers feel they are not useful, but the longer someone has worked as a teacher, the more likely they are to rate them as not useful;
- The future of the check: again, most teachers in each group would prefer to see the check discontinued, but the percentage choosing this option increases with length of service up to 20 years, when it declines slightly.
- Synthetic phonics as the only approved method of teaching reading: most teachers with under 10 years' service agreed somewhat with this policy, indicating that they have some reservations about synthetic phonics as the only approach. However, most of those teaching more than 10 years disagreed with the policy. We can assume that these teachers have had training and experience in using other methods as well as synthetic phonics to teach reading and can see the value of a balanced approach to the teaching of reading.

### **The views of the parents (chapter 6 and Appendix VII)**

We decided to give numbers of parents expressing these views rather than percentages. The percentages are to be found in Appendix VII.

Initial analysis indicated that:

- 137 of 338 parents reported that they were asked to prepare their child for the check, 128 referring to with pseudo words (23 making comments);
- 238 of 316 parents who responded reported that their child had passed the check;
- 242 of 304 parents reported that their child could already read with understanding at the time of the check;
- 258 of 304 parents reported that their child could already write recognisable words at the time of the check;
- 135 of 311 parents reported that their child was aware if they had passed or failed the check;
- 93 of 316 parents reported that they felt the check had affected their child (95 making comments);
- 187 of 298 parents thought the check should be discontinued and only 40 thought it should remain for all children;
- 165 of 295 parents do not agree with government literacy policy.

Complex analysis of the data indicated that parents are more likely to disagree with the check and government policy on teaching reading if their child has been affected by the check, does not enjoy reading, has failed the check or could not read well at the time of the check. It was interesting that so many of the parents whose children were reading well, enjoyed reading, or who had passed the check still express negative attitudes towards the policy and the check. There is also a very strong significant association between the child's reading ability at the time of the Phonics Screening Check and whether they passed the check. Data from the parent survey indicate that most children who were reading with understanding at the time of the check passed it, whereas those who could read a few words stood an equal chance of passing or failing. Children who knew a few or most letters were more likely to fail the test. There is a significant relationship between the child's reading ability and whether they passed the Phonics Screening Check.

### **Limitations**

It would be valuable to have a larger sample of parents whose children failed the check and to seek the views of parents whose children have only a limited command of English and or have recently arrived in England.

It would also be valuable to present the findings of this survey to a sample of recently qualified teachers and to those involved in teacher education and to explore their response.

### **Policy implications**

As can be seen from Appendix I the Department for Education has not involved Head Teachers, teachers or parents either in the development or implementation of the Phonics Screening Check. No attempt has been made to investigate the views of these stakeholders on its impact on the literacy experiences of young children in state schools in England. This survey has been an opportunity for teachers and parents to express their views.

We have identified some policy implications based on the views expressed in the survey by the Head Teachers, teachers and parents who responded to this questionnaire.

Concerning the Phonics Screening Check the government should seriously consider:

1. Either discontinuing the phonics check or making it voluntary;
2. whether, if the check is to be continued, children who fail it in Year 1 should still be required to re-sit it in Year 2 (this could be an optional decision which schools make);
3. removing pseudo words from the check. Most Head Teachers and teachers who responded to the survey do not agree with the inclusion of pseudo words within the check, stressing the effect of these on their practice in the early years, including on children who can already read.
4. Parental comments also indicated that a number of parents disagreed with the inclusion of pseudo words. Where their child could already read these led to confusion and were detrimental to their child's progress. Thus, it should be seriously considered whether to remove these if the check is to be continued; if the check is to be continued, consideration should be given to it becoming a formative assessment tool only to be used to support teachers in planning to address individual needs. Most teachers reported that they had witnessed some children becoming stressed during the check. Many parental comments also referred to stress and anxiety.
5. The use of a percentage pass mark on the Phonics Screening Check as a benchmark to measure school improvement should be reconsidered. This was regarded as unhelpful by many. Additionally, the emphasis given to the pass rates in Ofsted inspections was not felt to be helpful.
6. It appears that the 'high-stakes' status of the check and the percentage pass mark may place pressure on teachers which is passed down onto children, resulting in some becoming stressed.

Views on government literacy policy on the teaching of reading:

1. Given the proportion of teachers (47.47%), Head Teachers (62.22%) and parents (55.93%) who disagree with government policy, the government should consider a broader repertoire of approaches for teaching children to read. The Teachers' Standards in England currently require all trainee teachers and teachers to 'demonstrate a clear understanding of systematic synthetic phonics' (TS3). The inclusion of synthetic phonics within the Teachers' Standards makes this method of teaching reading mandatory. In the light of these results, government should consider amending this so that it emphasises the role of synthetic phonics within a broad range of approaches for teaching children to read rather than as the only method of teaching reading to all children.

2. The government should involve all stakeholders in discussion on the future of both the Phonics Screening Check and the current mandatory requirement that the only method of teaching reading should be by synthetic phonics.

The lack so far by government to undertake any such consultation and to seek the views of practitioners was the reason we undertook this independent survey (see Appendix I). The response to this survey by Head Teachers, teachers and parents to the multiple-choice questions, and the detailed comments they added to many questions, suggests that they are concerned about current literacy policy.

### **Postscript**

The research reported here in chapter 2, by NFER in 2015, by Alice Bradbury and Guy Roberts-Holmes in 2017 and by Jane Carter in 2018, taken together shows clearly some disturbing negative effects of current government literacy policy, in particular, the now high stakes Phonics Screening Check, on the literacy experiences of young children in the early years in infant and primary schools in England. Our survey adds the voices of Head Teachers, teachers and parents many of whom are experienced professionals, yet whose voices have, until now, played no part in the planning or implementation of this government policy. Surely this evidence should count with policy makers, revealing as it does the concern of many teachers and parents at the negative impact of many aspects of this policy, in particular the Phonics Screening Check.

## **Appendix I The future of the Phonics Screening Check. Margaret M. Clark**

At the Westminster Education Forum Keynote Seminar 7 December 2017 there was a report on the primary assessment consultation undertaken by the government in 2017, *Reforming primary assessment in England and implications for school accountability*, entitled 'Reforms to assessment at primary level'. It was given by Marc Cavey, Deputy Director, Assessment Strategy Policy and Communications, Standards and Testing Agency.

Marc Cavey gave an overview of developments at a national level in assessment policy over the last 18 months and outlined some of the key decisions and next steps flowing from the primary assessment consultation that was held during 2017. This was followed by questions. This is my question and Marc Cavey's response as reported in the written transcript which is a verbatim report of the proceedings. It is permitted to reproduce this.

Margaret M Clark: What is so sacrosanct about the phonics screening check that it's merely stated in that consultation document that it would remain statutory? There are no questions asked about it and so you probably didn't get many answers. I did submit evidence. It has been in existence since 2012. It is supposed to be diagnostic and it is now about as high stakes a check as you can imagine, because percentage pass is supposed to rise. It is on RAISE Online. It's used by Ofsted and yet you have a consultation document where you just mention that it will remain statutory.

Marc Cavey: The consultation document was developed within the parameters of Government policy and Government policy is that it's very firmly committed to phonics as a mode of teaching reading and is very firmly committed to the continuation of the phonics screening check. So, I don't think it would have been helpful to set up a false debate about something which the Government wasn't going to change, and Ministers weren't going to change, and you know Minister Gibb has very strong views on phonics and the phonics screening check. As you'll know, we've had the publication of some international comparison data around reading this week, which the Government would interpret as being an endorsement or a validation of the approaches that it's taken to the teaching of reading over the past few years, its commitment to phonics as a mode of teaching and the phonics screening check. So, we didn't ask a question about it and consequently we didn't have many responses on whether it should continue in the future. I know that there are differing views but the Government policy on this is what it is.

Following her attendance at an open session of The Science and Technology Committee on 20 March 2018 Wendy Scott OBE, one of the contributors to my new book, *Teaching Initial Literacy: Policies, evidence and ideology*, wrote to the chairman, Norman Lamb MP on 23 March. She stated: 'I am writing to draw your attention to widespread concerns within the early years sector as to the imposition of a single method of teaching reading which is based on spurious claims as to its effectiveness.... She cited the quotation I have noted above.

## **Appendix II Expenditure by the Department for Education on the Phonics Screening Check, commercial materials and training courses on synthetic phonics. Margaret M. Clark**

This information is based on a series of Freedom of Information Questions. I published the first information in the *Education Journal* in 2014 and reported it in chapter 18 (pages 148-151) of the revised edition of Clark, M.M. (2016) *Learning to be Literate: Insights from research for policy and practice* Abingdon: Routledge. This has been updated by a reply to my latest question sent to DfE on 29 March, reply received on 24 May 2018. I have been unable to estimate how much has been spent by schools or universities on commercial materials as a consequence of this policy. However, it is known that approximately £23 million was spent by schools on materials and training during the match-fund initiative between 2011-13. Bradbury in 2018 reported that over 5,000 schools use Read, Write Inc provided by Ruth Miskin Training (see chapter 1 here for further details). Here is only summary information, but further detail up to 2016 is to be found in Clark 2016. In the response to my latest Freedom of Information Questions I was given the names of the companies and institutions which had received funding. However, as it was stated that the information provided is protected by Crown Copyright I have omitted this information. Much of it is readily accessible and I was provided with links to further information. Here I only give a minimum estimate of DfE expenditure on this policy. Surely it is time to require DfE to provide information on its expenditure specifically on Synthetic Phonics and this policy.

### **Costing the synthetics policy in England 2011-16 (see Clark 2016: 148-151 for more detail up to 2015)**

1. Match-funding by DfE for commercial programmes and training courses 2011 to 2013 £23,593,109. NB The schools would have matched this funding which was for programmes from the catalogue of synthetic phonics materials issued by the government. During that period 14,263 schools claimed from this fund (233 for training only, 1,697 for training and products). Thus, the match-funding cost approximately £46 million over that period.
2. During 2012 and June 2015 for the Phonics Screening Check  
Distribution to schools, printing collating guidance products and statistical first release. £1,085,750 plus £300,000 for the pilot study. There is no information on the cost to the schools of administering the check.
3. External assessor in 2013. The only payment recorded is to The University of Reading of £11,760 to review the words.
4. NFER commissioned research by DfE was published in 2015 (see chapter 16 in Clark, 2016 for a summary of the findings) £278,695.
5. 2015-2016 NFER commissioned research by DfE to consider the extension to Year 3 of the check for children who still failed it in Year 2. £64,606. NB There is only an administrative report of a pilot study and this has not been published. It was decided not to implement this policy.
6. Eight schools to be awarded £10,000 each to work with neighbouring schools, approximately a further £80,000. However, as DfE now lists approximately £190,000 on phonics partnerships in their recent reply. (see below)

### **Updated information supplied by DfE on 24 May 2018**

On 29 March 2018 I sent four Freedom of Information Questions to DfE requesting up dated information on expenditure by DfE on the check and training courses on synthetic phonics. On 24 May I received a reply a summary of which is given below.

*a) Expenditure on the phonics screening check since 2016.*

The expenditure was itemised but only a summary is given below

2015 to Jan to March 2016 £26,888.59

2016-2017 £322,436.99

NB. It was stated that these costs are all those which can be directly attributed to the PSC as many elements of the Standard Testing Agency's test development and delivery resources and processes are centralised across a range of primary assessments.

*b) Information on expenditure on road shows in any way connected with synthetic phonics, which organisation was funded and where. (I have omitted the detail)*

2015-2016 £30,690.00

2017-2018 £76,890.00

A university 2017-2018 £43,080.54

*c) Information on expenditure on synthetic phonics courses pending or currently out to tender, costs anticipated and timescale*

Following a competitive procurement process for the Teaching and Leadership Innovation Fund Round 1 a contract was awarded in September 2017 to deliver a whole school literacy professional development programme to support systematic phonics teaching. The contract value is £1,056,290 and the contract expires on 31 March 2020.

*d) Any other expenditure by DfE on synthetic phonics.*

(I already had some information from a previous enquiry on the first two items:

*Matched funding* £23.7 million claimed by over 14,000 schools (see earlier)

*Phonics Partnerships* 2015-2018 £189,429.27)

Further £435,000 announced for further phonics partnerships and phonics roadshows up to 2020,

*Phonics advisers* Two contracts worth £5000 each in 2015-16 and 2016-17 and another for 2018-19.

*Strategic School Improvement Fund* 17 strategic School Improvement Fund Projects include phonics. These projects estimated expenditure £6.42 million.

*English Hubs* £26.3 million has been announced over the years 2018-2020.

### **Appendix III The Phonics Screening Check: The current state of play in Australia. Misty Adoniou, Associate Professor, University of Canberra, Australia**

There is no doubt that the teaching of early reading has become political. A review of policy and party politics in Australia confirms this, in case there had been any doubt.

Australia is a federation of six states and two territories. Although there is a Federal government that controls a number of purse strings, each state and territory government is ostensibly responsible for its own education policies.

Currently the Federal Government is a conservative party, the Liberal Party. They are working with a mixed bag of Liberal and Labor state and territory governments.

These state and territory education ministers gather several times a year as the 'Education Council' to meet with the Federal Education Minister to nut out federal approaches to issues in education. The Federal government uses its budgetary levers to coax the states and territories into taking up federal initiatives. However, political differences mean that federal agreements are rare. Nonetheless, in 2008 they did all agree to national standardized assessments conducted in Year 3, 5, 7 and 9 – the National Assessment Program of Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). Although 10 years on there are now grumbings about the worthiness of this testing regime and the Education Council has announced a review into NAPLAN.

For the past two years one of the Federal initiatives that Federal Minister of Education, Simon Birmingham, has been trying to get his state and territory colleagues to agree upon is to roll out the English Phonics Screening Check (PSC). So far, he has been unsuccessful. However, his home state - South Australia – voted in a new conservative government in March 2018, and they have made the PSC compulsory in that state. Victoria, Australia's second largest state, is currently led by a Labor government but it goes to a state election in October and the conservative opposition has said it will also make the PSC compulsory should it win office. This automatic commitment to the Federal government's conservative policy is curious as Victoria's literacy results would indicate that it has no issues with declining literacy outcomes in the early years. It is, in fact, Australia's best performing jurisdiction in the Year 3 national assessments, with only 0.9% of students below benchmark in writing, and 1.5% below benchmark in reading.

Meanwhile South Australian politicians have been particularly influenced by the parent dyslexia association in the state, which has advocated strongly for the Phonics Screening Check, describing it as necessary for the early identification of dyslexia. This is a claim that is repeated by Minister Birmingham in his public speeches (Ireland, 2017).

It has meant that South Australia's literacy policies are essentially 'dyslexia' policies. The new conservative government's literacy policy is called 'The Literacy Guarantee' and it is described thus:

- a comprehensive program to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes for all students, with the benefit to be most profound for those students with dyslexia and other learning difficulties.

The program will include:

- literacy coaches with expertise in phonics and teaching students with dyslexia and other learning difficulties
- phonics checks for all Year One students in South Australia
- free dyslexia workshops for parents across South Australia – including regional centres not currently serviced
- Literacy Guarantee conferences providing professional development opportunities for teachers.

## Liberal Party (2017)

The first of those Literacy Guarantee conferences has taken place, with all Reception and Year 1 teachers being trained in the PSC, and receiving training in synthetic phonics.

The SA parent dyslexia association had also demanded the implementation of synthetic phonics programs and decodable readers as the pedagogical solution to their children's literacy difficulties (Dyslexia SA, 2017). Their successful advocacy for their own children has effectively now changed the learning experience for all 5 and 6 year olds in South Australia.

Newly published guidance for all South Australian teachers now states,

*Ensure that students are using decodable readers as their main reading material.*

*Decodable readers are specially constructed short texts made up of words that the students can decode and high frequency sight words that they have been taught simultaneously.*

(Government of South Australia, p.7)

This framing of learning to read as a medical neurological condition is reflected in the strong role played by speech pathologists in arguing for the PSC. Minister Birmingham opened their May 2018 national conference, which was coincidentally also held in South Australia. He began by noting that this connection between health and education is one that the 'outside' world fails to appreciate:

*Why, some may ask, is the federal Minister for Education and Training speaking at the national conference of Speech Pathology Australia? Probably fewer people in this room, but certainly many outside would think there's a disconnect between what is often seen as an expert field in the health sector and the education portfolio. After all, as your website explains, speech pathologists are university-trained allied health professionals, with expertise in the assessment and treatment of communication and or swallowing difficulties, which does not at first glance seem to fit with the usual education issues.*

He goes on to explain that the fit is indeed a natural and productive one, and thanks them for their active participation in education policy debates.

Currently in Australia the states and territory ministers are not agreed that a national rollout of England's phonics check is a useful addition to the educational assessment landscape in Australia. Indeed, the Education Council is currently reviewing the worth of the national standardized assessments of NAPLAN, so there is little appetite for the introduction of a new national test for 6 year olds.

However, one small conservative-led state, South Australia, has implemented the PSC with all students, ostensibly it would seem, to identify dyslexic students. This was never the stated purpose of the PSC, and the developers of the check, and subsequent evaluators, acknowledge that the PSC is not nuanced enough to perform diagnoses of literacy difficulties.

All of South Australia's children and teachers are now being subjected to education policy that has been shaped by politics rather than pedagogy, and emotion rather than evidence.

One other state opposition in Victoria is promising to deliver the PSC should it win government, simply because it is a conservative education policy, not because there is evidence of a literacy decline in the



state.

Reading and writing should not be framed as ideological, nor as a medical condition. The consequence of such framing is the implementation of reductive, narrow pedagogies and accompanying assessments that fail to adequately capture the complexities of learning to read. It is crucial that teachers and researchers continue to foreground evidence for policy makers, and to clearly explain that evidence to parents.

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Ireland, Judith (2017) National tests for year one students under government plan. September 17<sup>th</sup> Sydney Morning Herald <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/national-tests-for-year-one-students-under-government-plan-20170917-gyj108.html>

Liberal Party South Australia (2017) Literacy Guarantee - the best possible start for all students  
<https://strongplan.com.au/policy/literacy-guarantee-the-best-possible-start-for-all-students/>

#### **Appendix IV The Phonics Screening Check 2012-2017: An independent enquiry into the views of teachers and parents.**

If you are a Head Teacher of an infant or a primary school in England, a teacher who has assessed children on the Phonics Screening Check or a parent any of whose children have been assessed on the check we hope you will take part in this independent survey. It is important that we achieve a large and representative sample to ensure our evidence has credibility in informing debates at DfE on the effect of current literacy policy in England. Please take part in the survey whether or not you agree with government literacy policy.

Professor Margaret M. Clark, Visiting Professor, Newman University in collaboration with Professor Jonathan Glazzard, Leeds Beckett University.

The Phonics Screening Check is a statutory assessment administered to all children in Year 1 in state schools in England since 2012. The check consists of 40 words to be read aloud to the teacher (20 real words and 20 pseudo or alien words). Any child who fails to read at least 32 out of 40 words correctly must re-take the check at the end of Year 2.

The survey forms were accessed from one of three links, one for Head Teachers, another for teachers who had assessed children on the check and a third for parents any of whose children had been assessed on the check. Parents who had more than one child assessed on the check were asked to complete the survey for their child who had most recently been assessed,

*What is the aim of the research?* This is an independent research project to inform government policy, evidence-based by the views of teachers and parents. Your participation is entirely voluntary. Your answers will remain anonymous. Our aim in collecting geographical information, and years in teaching, is to enable us to assess how representative a sample we achieve. Should you wish to contribute further to the research either in writing or by an interview please contact us.

**Why is this survey important?** There were no questions about the future of the Phonics Screening Check in the Government consultation in 2017 on Primary assessment in England. It was merely stated that it is a statutory assessment. Thus, it appears the government is firmly committed to its continuation. We feel it is time to give teachers and parents a voice through the medium of an independent survey exploring the effect government policy is having on children's literacy experiences in school, whether the check is value for money and whether it should remain statutory.

## Appendix V Head Teachers: The survey questions and answers

### Q1: Where is your school?

Answered: 230 Skipped: 0

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Greater London	14.35%	33
South East	24.35%	56
South West	8.26%	19
East Midlands	11.30%	26
West Midlands	9.13%	21
East of England	5.65%	13
Yorkshire and the Humber	10.43%	24
North East	4.78%	11
North West	11.74%	27
TOTAL		230

### Q2: What type of school?

Answered: 230 Skipped: 0

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
infant	10.00%	23
primary	86.09%	198
junior	2.17%	5
other	1.74%	4
TOTAL		230

**Q3: For how many years have you taught?**

Answered: 230 Skipped: 0

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Fewer than 2	4.35%	10
2-10	18.26%	42
11-20	35.22%	81
more than 20 years	42.17%	97
TOTAL		230

**Q4: Have you personally administered the check:**

Answered: 230 Skipped: 0

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	55.65%	128
No	44.35%	102
TOTAL		230

**Q5: To how many children have you administered the check?**

Answered: 127 Skipped: 103

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Fewer than 20	7.09%	9
20-29	16.54%	21
30-39	7.87%	10
40 or more	68.50%	87
TOTAL		127

**Q6: Are you also a parent of any children who has sat the check?**

Answered: 189 Skipped: 41

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	24.87%	47
No	75.13%	142
TOTAL		189

**Q7: What was the percentage pass on the check in your school for children in Year 1 in 2012**

Answered: 189 Skipped: 41

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Under 50%	11.11%	21
50-59%	14.81%	28
60-69%	23.81%	45
70-79%	14.29%	27
80-89%	16.93%	32
90% or higher	7.41%	14
not applicable	11.64%	22
TOTAL		189

**Q8: What was the percentage pass on the check in your school for children in Year 1 in 2017**

Answered: 189 Skipped: 41

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Under 50%	0.53%	1
50-59%	2.65%	5
60-69%	15.34%	29
70-79%	23.81%	45
80-89%	37.04%	70
90% or higher	15.87%	30
not applicable	4.76%	9
TOTAL		189

**Q 9: Approximately how many children in Year 1 in your school sat the check in 2017?**

Answered 189 Skipped 41

Answer Choices	Responses	
Under 20	13.23%	25
21-29	13.76%	26
30-39	17.99%	34
40 or more	55.03%	104

**Q10: How many children re-sat the check in Year 2 in 2017?**

Answered: 189 Skipped: 41

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
None	2.65%	5
1-5	41.27%	78
6-10	29.63%	56
more than 10	26.46%	50
TOTAL		189

**Q11: Are parents told about the check in advance? (select all that apply)**

Answered: 180 Skipped: 50

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes orally	50.00%	90
Yes in writing	65.00%	117
No	7.78%	14
Don't know	4.44%	8
Total Respondents: 180		

**Q12: Are parents told whether their child passed or failed the check? (select all that apply)**

Answered: 180 Skipped: 50

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes orally	17.22%	31
Yes in writing	86.11%	155
No	5.00%	9
Don't know	4.44%	8
Total Respondents: 180		

**Q13: Are parents told their child's actual mark on the check?**

Answered: 180 Skipped: 50

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	50.56%	91
No	41.11%	74
Don't know	8.33%	15
TOTAL		180



**Q14: Has the phonics check affected the way you now teach children to read in your school?**

Answered: 180 Skipped: 50

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
No	10.00%	18
Not much	18.33%	33
Somewhat	39.44%	71
A great deal	32.22%	58
TOTAL		180

73 comments (see chapter 2 for commentary)

**Q15: Does the phonics check provide you with information on individual children which you did not already have?**

Answered: 180 Skipped: 50

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	11.11%	20
No	88.89%	160
TOTAL		180

**Q16: Do you think it is useful to have real and pseudo/alien words in the check?**

Answered: 180 Skipped: 50

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	17.78%	32
No	80.00%	144
Don't know	2.22%	4
TOTAL		180

**Q17: Do you think it is useful to assess all children on the phonics check in Year 1?**

Answered: 180 Skipped: 50

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	22.22%	40
No	77.78%	140
TOTAL		180

107 comments (see chapter 2 for commentary)

**Q18: Do you think pass/fail should be recorded for the check?**

Answered: 180 Skipped: 50

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	29.44%	53
No	70.56%	127
TOTAL		180

**Q19: Is it useful to re-test children in Year 2 who fail the check in Year 1?**

Answered: 180 Skipped: 50

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	36.11%	65
No	63.89%	115
TOTAL		180

**Q20: Do you buy commercial synthetic phonics materials or training for your school?**

Answered: 180 Skipped: 50

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	45.56%	82
No	54.44%	98
TOTAL		180

62 comments (see chapter 2 for commentary)

**Q21: Do you think the check should remain statutory for all children in Year 1?**

Answered: 180 Skipped: 50

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	15.56%	28
No	84.44%	152
TOTAL		180

**Q22: Literacy experiences in school and current government literacy policy.**

**In England synthetic phonics is mandated as the only method for teaching children to read. To what extent do you agree with this policy?**

Answered: 180 Skipped: 50

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Agree	6.11%	11
Agree somewhat	31.67%	57
Disagree	62.22%	112
TOTAL		180

73 comments (see chapter 2 for commentary)

**Results of statistical analyses of data from the Head Teachers' questionnaires These analyses were carried out by Susan Atkinson**

We wanted to find out whether there were significant differences in responses to items on the questionnaire between Head Teachers who:

- Worked in primary or infant schools
- Had administered the check or had not administered the check
- Were parents of a child who had taken the phonics screening test and those who were not.

The items selected for analysis were:

Item 15: Does the Phonics Check provide you with information on individual children which you did not already have?

Item 21: Do you think the Check should remain statutory for all children in Year 1?

Item 22: In England, synthetic phonics is mandated as the only method for teaching children to read. To what extent do you agree with this government policy?

Chi-square tests were selected for the analyses because all the data is categorical.

**Investigating significant relationships for Head Teachers in primary and infant schools**

*Item 15: Does the Phonics Check provide you with information on individual children which you did not already have?*

The majority in each group feels that the Phonics Check does not give any additional information on individual children. There was no significant relationship between school type and opinion on information added:  $\chi^2=.84$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $p=.840$ , Cramer's  $V=.068$ .

*Item 21: Do you think the Check should remain statutory for all children in Year 1?*

The majority in each group feels that the Phonics Check should not remain statutory. There was no significant relationship between school type and opinion on the future of the Check:  $\chi^2=3.242$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $p=.356$ , Cramer's  $V=.134$ .

*Item 22: In England, synthetic phonics is mandated as the only method for teaching children to read. To what extent do you agree with this government policy?*

The majority in Infant and Primary Schools disagree that synthetic phonics should be the only mandated way to teach reading. There was no significant relationship between the variables:  $\chi^2=3.830$ ,  $df=6$ ,  $p=.700$ , Cramer's  $V=.103$ .

### **Investigating relationships between chosen items and whether Head Teachers had administered the Check themselves or not**

*Item 15: Does the Phonics Check provide you with information on individual children which you did not already have?*

The majority of Head Teachers in each group do not feel that the Check gives them additional information about individuals. There was no significant relationship between administering the test and whether it gave additional information:  $\chi^2=.234$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p=.628$ ,  $\phi=-.036$ .

*Item 21: Do you think the Check should remain statutory for all children in Year 1?*

Most people in each group thought the Check should not remain statutory, and there was no significant relationship between administering the test and opinions on whether it should remain statutory:  $\chi^2=.853$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p=.356$ ,  $\phi=.069$ .

*Item 22: In England, synthetic phonics is mandated as the only method for teaching children to read. To what extent do you agree with this government policy?*

The majority of those who had administered the Check agreed with the policy on synthetic phonics, but the majority of those who had not administered the Check agreed somewhat. There was no significant relationship between administering the test and opinion on synthetic phonics as the only method for teaching reading:  $\chi^2=2.804$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p=.246$ , Cramer's  $V=.125$ .

### **Relationships between chosen items and whether Head Teachers were parents of children who had taken the Check or not**

*Item 15: Does the Phonics Check provide you with information on individual children which you did not already have?*

The majority of Head Teachers felt that the Check does not give additional information on individual children. There was no significant relationship between parenthood and whether it gave additional information:  $\chi^2=1.440$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p=.230$ ,  $\phi=-.089$ .

*Item 21: Do you think the Check should remain statutory for all children in Year 1?*

Most Head Teachers in each group believed that the Check should not remain statutory. There was no significant relationship between parenthood and opinions on whether it should remain statutory:  $\chi^2=1.585$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p=.208$ ,  $\phi=.094$ .

*Item 22: In England, synthetic phonics is mandated as the only method for teaching children to read. To what extent do you agree with this government policy?*

The highest percentage in each group disagreed with the government's policy on reading. There was no significant relationship between parenthood and opinion on synthetic phonics as the only method for teaching reading:  $\chi^2=2.322$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p=.313$ , Cramer's  $V=.114$ .

## **Conclusions**

The views of Head Teachers are not affected significantly by whether or not they are parents of children who have taken the test, whether they have administered the Check themselves, or the kind of school they work in. The majority of Head Teachers disagree with the government's policy on teaching reading, do not think the Check should remain statutory, and do not feel that the Check provides any additional information on children.

## Appendix VI Teachers: The survey questions and answers

### Q1: Where is your school?

Answered: 1,348 Skipped: 0

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Greater London	10.61%	143
South East	18.99%	256
South West	9.79%	132
East Midlands	12.98%	175
West Midlands	10.09%	136
East of England	7.20%	97
Yorkshire and the Humber	10.61%	143
North East	5.56%	75
North West	14.17%	191
TOTAL		1,348

### Q2: What type of school?

Answered: 1,348 Skipped: 0

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
infant	16.99%	229
primary	81.01%	1,092
junior	0.22%	3
other	1.78%	24
TOTAL		1,348

### Q3: For how many years have you taught?

Answered: 1,348 Skipped: 0

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Fewer than 2	7.34%	99
2-10	47.63%	642
11-20	30.49%	411
more than 20 years	14.54%	196
TOTAL		1,348

**Q4: In which year or years have you administered the check? (select all that apply)**

Answered: 1,348 Skipped: 0

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
2012	27.00%	364
2013	34.79%	469
2014	41.39%	558
2015	52.30%	705
2016	61.94%	835
2017	75.59%	1,019
Total Respondents: 1,348		

**Q5: To which year groups did you administer the check?**

Answered: 1,348 Skipped: 0

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Year 1 only	53.34%	719
Year 2 only	6.53%	88
Both Years 1 and 2	40.13%	541
TOTAL		1,348

**Q6: Approximately how many children in total have you assessed on the check?**

Answered: 1,348 Skipped: 0

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Fewer than 20	7.79%	105
20-39	25.30%	341
40- 59	10.83%	146
60 or more	56.08%	756
TOTAL		1,348



**Q7: Are you also a parent of any children who have sat the Phonics Screening Check?**

Answered: 1,348

Skipped:

0

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	23.37%	315
No	76.63%	1,033
TOTAL		1,348

**Q8: In your school are parents told in advance about the check and its purpose?**

Answered: 1,140 Skipped: 208

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	91.14%	1,039
No	6.23%	71
Don't know	2.63%	30
TOTAL		1,140

**Q9: What preparation do you give children for the check? (select all that apply).**

Answered: 1,140 Skipped: 208

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Practice with individual words	96.67%	1,102
Practice with pseudo words	97.46%	1,111
Assistance from commercial materials	48.16%	549
None	0.53%	6
Other (please specify)	18.86%	215
Total Respondents: 1,140		

215 comments (see chapter 3 for commentary)

**Q10 If you use commercial materials, which ones?**

Answered: 1140 Skipped: 208

1140 comments (see chapter 3 for commentary)

**Q11: Are parents given guidance on how to prepare their children for the check?**

Answered: 1,140 Skipped: 208

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	71.58%	816
No	24.47%	279
Don't know	3.95%	45
TOTAL		1,140

519 comments (see chapter 3 for commentary)

**Q12: Have you observed children affected by the check?**

Answered: 1,140 Skipped: 208

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
No	37.02%	422
Yes a few	48.68%	555
Yes many	14.30%	163
TOTAL		1,140

533 comments (see chapter 3 for commentary)

**Q13: What percentage of the children in Year 1 in your school passed the check in 2012 (the first year of the check)?**

Answered: 1,140 Skipped: 208

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Under 50%	9.39%	107
50-59%	9.82%	112
60-69%	11.58%	132
70-79%	11.75%	134
80-89%	9.91%	113
over 90%	5.18%	59
Don't know	42.37%	483
TOTAL		1,140

**Q14: What percentage of the children in Year 1 in your school passed the check in 2017?**

Answered: 1,140 Skipped: 208

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Under 50%	1.93%	22
50-59%	3.16%	36
60-69%	8.86%	101
70-79%	20.70%	236
80-89%	36.67%	418
over 90%	21.32%	243
Don't know	7.37%	84
TOTAL		1,140

**Q15: How many children re-sat the check in Year 2 in 2017?**

Answered: 1,140 Skipped: 208

1140 Answers (See chapter 3 for commentary)

**Q16: Are parents told whether their child passed or failed the check?**

Answered: 1,140 Skipped: 208

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes orally	5.26%	60
Yes in writing	73.86%	842
Yes orally and in writing	14.30%	163
No	3.68%	42
Don't know	2.89%	33
TOTAL		1,140

**Q17: Are parents told their child's actual mark on the check?**

Answered: 1,140 Skipped: 208

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	50.26%	573
No	41.32%	471
Don't know	8.42%	96
TOTAL		1,140

**Q18: Do you think children seem worried after the results of the check are known?**

Answered: 1,140 Skipped: 208

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
No, none worried	46.40%	529
A few slightly worried	27.28%	311
Some worried	15.88%	181
Some very worried	4.12%	47
Don't know	6.32%	72
TOTAL		1,140

**Q19: Do you feel the phonics check provides you with information on individual children which you did not already have?**

Answered: 1,108 Skipped: 240

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	6.41%	71
No	93.59%	1,037
TOTAL		1,108

**Q20: How accurate do you regard the Phonics Screening Check to be in its assessment of children's decoding skills?**

Answered: 1,108 Skipped: 240

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Very accurate	2.89%	32
Accurate	34.66%	384
Not very accurate	46.93%	520
Not accurate	15.52%	172
TOTAL		1,108

**Q21: Do you feel it is useful to include both real and pseudo/ alien words in the check**

Answered: 1,108 Skipped: 240

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	20.31%	225
No	79.69%	883
TOTAL		1,108

298 comments (see Chapter 3 for commentary)

**Q22: Did you notice any difference in the results on the real and pseudo/alien words?**

Answered: 1,108 Skipped: 240

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	37.55%	416
No	11.91%	132
Not much	23.10%	256
Somewhat	23.10%	256
A great deal	4.33%	48
TOTAL		1,108

**Q23: Do you think it is useful to record pass/fail on the check?**

Answered: 1,108 Skipped: 240

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	25.27%	280
No	74.73%	828
TOTAL		1,108

**Q24: Do you think it is useful to re-test children in Year 2 who fail the check in Year 1?**

Answered: 1,108 Skipped: 240

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	25.90%	287
No	74.10%	821
TOTAL		1,108

**Q25: Has the phonics check affected the way you now teach children to read in your school?**

Answered: 1,108 Skipped: 240

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
No	14.98%	166
Not much	13.54%	150
Somewhat	38.36%	425
A great deal	33.12%	367
TOTAL		1,108

481 Comments (see chapter 3 for commentary)

**Q26: The Phonics Screening Check is a statutory assessment of all children in Year 1 and any child who fails to achieve a pass mark of 32 out of 40 is required to re-sit the check in Year 2. What do you think the future of the Phonics Screening Check should be?**

Answered: 1,108 Skipped: 240

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Remain statutory for all children in Year 1	11.64%	129
Become voluntary and administered only to some children	20.04%	222
Be discontinued	68.32%	757
TOTAL		1,108

**Q27: If the check remains statutory should children who fail to achieve a mark of 32 in Year 1 re-sit the check in Year 2?**

Answered: 1,108 Skipped: 240

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	24.19%	268
No	75.81%	840
TOTAL		1,108

334 comments (see chapter 3 for commentary)

**Q28: In England synthetic phonics is mandated as the only method for teaching children to read. To what extent do you agree with this government policy?**

Answered: 1,108 Skipped: 240

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Agree	10.29%	114
Agree somewhat	42.24%	468
Disagree	47.47%	526
TOTAL		1,108

429 comments (see chapter 3 for commentary)

**Results of statistical analyses of data from the teachers' questionnaires** These analyses were carried out by Susan Atkinson

We wanted to find out whether there were significant differences in responses to items on the questionnaire between teachers who were parents of a child who had taken the phonics screening check

and those who were not, and also whether there were differences depending on length of service. The items selected were:

Item 12: Have you observed children stressed during the check?

Item 20: How accurate do you regard the Phonics Screening Check to be in its assessment of children's decoding skills?

Item 21: Do you feel it is useful to include both real and pseudo/alien words in the check?

Item 26: Do you think the Phonics Check should remain statutory, become voluntary or be discontinued?

Item 27: If the Check remains statutory, should children who fail to achieve a mark of 32 in Year 1 resit the Check in Year 2?

Item 28: In England, synthetic phonics is mandated as the only method for teaching children to read. to what extent do you agree with this government policy?

Chi-square tests were selected for the analyses because all the data is categorical.

### **Investigating significant relationships for teachers who are and are not parents of children who have taken the Check.**

*Item 12: Have you observed children stressed during the check?*

The majority of teachers in both groups have observed a few children who were stressed during the Check. There was no significant relationship between teacher group and the number of children observed who were stressed:  $\chi^2=.744$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p=.69$ , Cramer's  $V=.026$ .

*Item 20: How accurate do you regard the Phonics Screening Check to be in its assessment of children's decoding skills?*

The majority of teachers in each group see the Phonics Screening Check as accurate or not very accurate in assessing decoding skills. There was no significant relationship between teachers with or without children and opinions on the accuracy of the Check:  $\chi^2=3.98$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $p=.264$ , Cramer's  $V=.060$ .

*Item 21: Do you feel it is useful to include both real and pseudo/alien words in the check?*

The majority of teachers in both groups feel that pseudo words are not useful in the Phonics Screening Check. There is no significant relationship between teacher group and opinion on pseudo words:  $\chi^2=.070$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p=.792$ ,  $\phi=.011$ .

*Item 26: Do you think the Phonics Check should remain statutory, become voluntary or be discontinued?*

The majority of teachers in both groups think the check should be discontinued. There was no significant relationship between having children who had taken the Check and opinion on the future of the check:  $\chi^2=1.061$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p=.588$ , Cramer's  $V=.031$ .

*Item 27: If the Check remains statutory, should children who fail to achieve a mark of 32 in Year 1 resit the Check in Year 2?*

The majority in each group of teachers thinks that children should not have to retake the Check in Year 2. There was no significant relationship between having children who had taken the Check and opinion on retaking the Check:  $\chi^2=.154$ ,  $df=1$ ,  $p=.695$ ,  $\phi=.014$ .



*Item 28: In England, synthetic phonics is mandated as the only method for teaching children to read. to what extent do you agree with this government policy?*

The majority in each group of teachers disagrees with having synthetic phonics as the only method of teaching reading, with the fewest agreeing with it. There was no significant relationship between having children who had taken the Check and opinion on synthetic phonics:  $\chi^2=1.322$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $p=.516$ , Cramer's  $V=.035$ .

### **Investigating significant relationships for teachers depending on length of service**

For the following analyses, teachers were grouped according to their length of service: under 2 years, 2-10 years, 11-20 years, and over 20 years.

*Item 12: Have you observed children stressed during the check?*

The majority of teachers in both groups have observed a few children who were stressed during the Check. There was no significant relationship between teacher group and the number of children observed who were stressed:  $\chi^2=4.706$ ,  $df=6$ ,  $p=.582$ , Cramer's  $V=.045$ .

*Item 20: How accurate do you regard the Phonics Screening Check to be in its assessment of children's decoding skills?*

The majority of teachers in each group see the Phonics Screening Check as not very accurate in assessing decoding skills. There was no significant relationship between teachers' length of service and opinions on the accuracy of the Check:  $\chi^2=8.574$ ,  $df=9$ ,  $p=.477$ , Cramer's  $V=.051$ .

*Item 21: Do you feel it is useful to include both real and pseudo/alien words in the check?*

The majority of teachers in all groups feel that pseudo words are not useful in the Phonics Screening Check.

**There is a significant relationship** between teacher length of service and opinion on pseudo words:  $\chi^2=10.276$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $p=.016$ , Cramer's  $V=.096$ .

*Item 26: Do you think the Phonics Check should remain statutory, become voluntary or be discontinued?*

The majority of teachers in all groups think the check should be discontinued.

**There is a significant relationship** between length of service and opinion on the future of the check:  $\chi^2=23.43$ ,  $df=6$ ,  $p=.001$ , Cramer's  $V=.103$ .

*Item 27: If the Check remains statutory, should children who fail to achieve a mark of 32 in Year 1 re-sit the Check in Year 2?*

The majority in each group of teachers thinks that children should not have to retake the Check in Year 2. There was no significant relationship between length of service and opinion on retaking the Check:  $\chi^2=1.74$ ,  $df=3$ ,  $p=.628$ , Cramer's  $V=.04$ .

*Item 28: In England, synthetic phonics is mandated as the only method for teaching children to read. to what extent do you agree with this government policy?*

The majority of teachers who have been teaching under 2 years or for 2 to 10 years 'agree somewhat' with having synthetic phonics as the only method of teaching reading, whereas the majority of those teaching for more than 10 years disagree with it as the only method.

**There is a significant relationship** between length of service and opinion on synthetic phonics:  $\chi^2=67.34$ ,  $df=6$ ,  $p<.0005$ , Cramer's  $V=.174$ .

## Conclusions

In summary, the statistical analyses show that:

- There are no statistically significant differences on any of the items selected between teachers who have children who have taken the Check and those who have not. This suggests that the experience of having a child taking the Check does not affect teacher opinions on the value of the Check or of synthetic phonics.
- **There are significant differences** on three of the items when teachers are grouped by length of service:
  - The usefulness of pseudo words in the Check: all teachers feel they are not useful, but the longer someone has worked as a teacher, the more likely they are to rate them as not useful.
  - The future of the Check: again, the majority of teachers in each group would prefer to see the task discontinued, but the percentage choosing this option increases with length of service up to 20 years, when it declines slightly.
  - Synthetic phonics as the only approved method of teaching reading: the majority of teachers with under 10 years' service agreed somewhat with this policy, indicating that they have some reservations about synthetic phonics as the only approach. However, an increasing majority of those teaching more than 10 years disagreed with the policy. We can assume that these teachers have had training and experience in using other methods as well as synthetic phonics to teach reading, and they may see the value of a wider approach.

## Appendix V11 Parents: The survey questions and answers

### Q1: Have you seen a copy of the Phonics Screening Check?

Answered: 419 Skipped: 0

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	55.13%	231
No	44.87%	188
TOTAL		419

### Q2: How many of your children have sat the phonics check?

Answered: 419 Skipped: 0

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
one	70.41%	295
two	23.39%	98
three	3.82%	16
more than three.	2.39%	10
TOTAL		419

### Q3: In what area was your child at school at the time of the check?

Answered: 382 Skipped: 37

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Greater London	5.50%	21
South East	24.61%	94
South West	9.69%	37
East Midlands	13.09%	50
West Midlands	14.40%	55
East of England	6.02%	23
Yorkshire and the Humber	10.21%	39
North East	3.93%	15
North West	12.57%	48
TOTAL		382

**Q4: What type of school did your child attend at the time of the check?**

Answered: 382 Skipped: 37

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
infant (4-7)	25.39%	97
primary (4-11)	74.61%	285
TOTAL		382

**Q5: Person completing the questionnaire**

Answered: 382 Skipped: 37

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Mother	94.24%	360
Father	2.62%	10
Other (please specify)	3.14%	12
TOTAL		382

**Q6: Is this your first child to have sat the screening check**

Answered: 382 Skipped: 37

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	70.68%	270
No	29.32%	112
TOTAL		382

**Q7: Sex of child**

Answered: 382 Skipped: 37

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Boy	53.14%	203
Girl	46.86%	179
TOTAL		382

**Q8: Date of birth of child**

Answered: 382 Skipped: 37

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
2005	2.36%	9
2006	4.19%	16
2007	4.97%	19
2008	9.69%	37
2009	15.97%	61
2010	19.90%	76
2011	28.80%	110
2012	14.14%	54
TOTAL		382

**Q9: Is your child's first language English?**

Answered: 382 Skipped: 37

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	98.17%	375
No	1.83%	7
TOTAL		382

**Q10: Is your child fluent in English?**

Answered: 7 Skipped: 412

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	71.43%	5
No	28.57%	2
TOTAL		7

**Q11: How many languages does your child speak?**

Answered: 380 Skipped: 39

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
one	95.00%	361
two	4.21%	16
more than two	0.79%	3
TOTAL		380

**Q12: When did this child take the check?**

Answered: 338 Skipped: 81

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
2012	7.10%	24
2013	4.44%	15
2014	8.88%	30
2015	15.09%	51
2016	19.23%	65
2017	45.86%	155
Total Respondents: 338		

**Q13: Were you informed in advance about the check?**

Answered: 338 Skipped: 81

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes orally	19.53%	66
Yes in writing	24.85%	84
Yes both orally and in writing	37.87%	128
No	17.75%	60
TOTAL		338

**Q14: Were you asked to prepare your child in any way for the check?**

Answered: 338 Skipped: 81

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	40.53%	137
No	50.30%	170
Can't remember	9.17%	31
TOTAL		338

**Q 15: In what ways were you asked to prepare your child? (select all that apply)**

Answered: 157 Skipped: 262

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
by practising individual words	70.70%	111
by practising recognising alien (pseudo) words	81.53%	128
with assistance from materials you bought	9.55%	15
Other (please specify)	14.65%	23
Total Respondents: 157		

23 comments (see chapter 4 for commentary)

**Q16 If you bought any materials to help, do you remember the name of the materials? If so, please indicate.**

Answered: 316 Skipped: 103

**Q17: Did any aspects of the Phonics Screening Check affect your child?**

Answered: 316 Skipped: 103

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Don't know	17.41%	55
No	53.16%	168
Yes	29.43%	93
TOTAL		316

95 comments (see chapter 4 for commentary)

**Q18: Did your child pass the check?**

Answered: 316 Skipped: 103

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	75.32%	238
No	17.41%	55
Don't know	7.28%	23
TOTAL		316

**Q19: Did your child pass the check when they sat it again in Year 2?**

Answered: 55 Skipped: 364

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	38.18%	21
No	18.18%	10
Has not re-taken it yet.	43.64%	24
TOTAL		55

**Q20: Were you informed what mark your child received?**

Answered: 314 Skipped: 105

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes in writing	51.27%	161
Yes orally	11.46%	36
Yes orally and in writing	9.87%	31
No	27.39%	86
TOTAL		314



**Q21: What mark did your child receive?**

Answered: 225 Skipped: 194

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
0-10	2.22%	5
11-20	2.67%	6
21-31	4.89%	11
32-39	51.11%	115
40	22.67%	51
Don't remember	16.44%	37
TOTAL		225

**Q22: Is your child aware that they passed or failed the check?**

Answered: 311 Skipped: 108

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	43.41%	135
No	56.59%	176
TOTAL		311

**Q23: How well could this child read at the time of the check?**

Answered: 304 Skipped: 115

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Could already read with understanding	79.61%	242
Could read a few words	15.13%	46
Could recognise most of the letters of the alphabet	4.28%	13
Could only recognise a few letters of the alphabet	0.66%	2
Was unable to recognise any letters	0.33%	1
TOTAL		304

**Q24: How well could your child write at the time of the check?**

Answered: 304 Skipped: 115

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Could write recognisable words	84.87%	258
Could write most of the letters of the alphabet	9.21%	28
Could write their own name	4.61%	14
Was able to distinguish drawing and writing	1.32%	4
Was not yet able to distinguish writing and drawing	0.00%	0
TOTAL		304

**Q25: Is he or she reading with understanding now?**

Answered: 302 Skipped: 117

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	96.03%	290
No	3.97%	12
TOTAL		302

**Q26: Is he or she writing meaningful sentences now?**

Answered: 302 Skipped: 117

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	97.68%	295
No	2.32%	7
TOTAL		302

**Q27: Does your child enjoy reading?**

Answered: 302 Skipped: 117

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Very much	56.95%	172
Somewhat	31.46%	95
Does not enjoy reading	11.59%	35
TOTAL		302

**Q28: Does your child prefer to read on screen or from books?**

Answered: 302 Skipped: 117

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
On screen	4.30%	13
Books	65.89%	199
Both on screen and from books	23.51%	71
Neither	6.29%	19
TOTAL		302

**Q29: The Phonics Screening Check is statutory for all children in Year 1 and to be re-taken by all children in Year 2 who fail to gain a mark of 32 out of 40. Do you think the check should remain statutory?**

Answered: 298 Skipped: 121

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes for all children	13.42%	40
Yes for some children	5.37%	16
No it should be a voluntary assessment	18.46%	55
No it should be discontinued	62.75%	187
TOTAL		298

**Q30: How much do you know about the way that your child is being taught to read in school?**

Answered: 295 Skipped: 124

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
In detail	51.86%	153
Some information	38.64%	114
Very little information	9.49%	28
TOTAL		295

**Q31: How have you learnt about this?**

Answered: 295 Skipped: 124

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
By information from the school	62.37%	184
By homework set for you to do with your child	14.58%	43
By observation in the classroom	14.58%	43
Not applicable	8.47%	25
TOTAL		295

**Q32: To what extent do you agree with current government literacy policy?**

Answered: 295 Skipped: 124

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Agree	5.76%	17
Agree somewhat	28.47%	84
Do not agree	55.93%	165
Don't know	9.83%	29
TOTAL		295

**Q33: Are you a teacher who has administered the check to any children yourself?**

Answered: 295 Skipped: 124

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Yes	26.78%	79
No	73.22%	216
TOTAL		295

**Q34: In what year or years did you administer the check?**

Answered: 78 Skipped: 341

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
2012	30.77%	24
2013	32.05%	25
2014	33.33%	26
2015	41.03%	32
2016	41.03%	32
2017	48.72%	38
Total Respondents: 78		

## Results of statistical analyses of data from the Parents' questionnaires These analyses were carried out by Susan Atkinson

We wanted to find out whether there were significant differences in responses to items on the questionnaire between groups of parents. Chi-square tests were selected for the analyses because all the data is categorical.

Table 1 shows which comparisons were statistically significant and which were not significant (NS).

**Table 1: Comparisons of variables from Parents' questionnaires indicating which were statistically significant.**

	Agree with government literacy policy?	Should screening check remain statutory?
Seen a copy of screening check	NS	NS
Number of children you have who have taken test	NS	NS
Is this your first child to take Check?	NS	NS
Sex of child	NS	NS
Is your first language English?	NS	NS
Did the school inform you about the Check?	NS	NS
Were you asked to prepare your child?	NS	NS
Did the Check affect your child	Significant	Significant
Did your child pass?	Significant	Significant
How well could they read when they did the Check?	Significant	NS
Do they enjoy reading?	Significant	NS
Should the Check remain statutory?	Significant	
Are you a teacher who has administered the Check?	NS	NS

Only the statistically significant results are reported here.

### 1. Relationships between attitude to reading policy and the effect of the Screening Check on their child

The majority in each group disagrees with the government's policy on teaching reading. Parents whose child was affected by the Check are more negative about the policy on reading. There is a significant relationship between whether the child was affected by the Check and parental attitude to government reading policy:  $\chi^2=22.71$ ,  $df=6$ ,  $p=.001$ , Cramer's  $V=.196$ .

### 2. Relationships between attitude to reading policy and whether their child passed the Screening Check

The majority in each group whose child passed or failed the check disagrees with the government's policy on teaching reading. Parents whose child failed the Check are more negative about the policy on reading. There is a significant relationship between whether the child passed the Check and parental attitude to government reading policy:  $\chi^2=25.981$ ,  $df=6$ ,  $p<.0005$ , Cramer's  $V=.210$ .

### 3. Relationships between parental attitude to reading policy and their child's reading ability at the time of the Screening Check

The majority in each group disagrees with the government's policy on teaching reading. The percentage who disagree increases as reading ability decreases. There is a significant relationship between the child's

reading ability and parental attitude to government reading policy:  $\chi^2=21.328$ ,  $df=12$ ,  $p=.046$ , Cramer's  $V=.155$ . **NB: this is the most marginal of the significant results.**

**4. Relationships between attitude to reading policy and how much their child enjoys reading**

The majority in each group disagrees with the government's policy on teaching reading. The percentage of parents in each group who disagree with the policy increases the less their child enjoys reading. There is a significant relationship between whether the child enjoys reading and parental attitude to government reading policy:  $\chi^2=18.601$ ,  $df=6$ ,  $p=.005$ , Cramer's  $V=.178$ .

**5. Relationships between attitude to reading policy and opinion on whether the Screening Check should remain statutory**

Parents who feel that the Screening Check should remain statutory for all or some children are more likely to agree or agree somewhat with the government's reading policy. Parents who feel that it should become voluntary or be discontinued are more likely to disagree with the government's reading policy. There is a significant relationship between views on whether the Check should remain statutory and parental attitude to government reading policy:  $\chi^2=116.907$ ,  $df=9$ ,  $p<.0005$ , Cramer's

**6. Relationships between parental attitudes to the Screening Check and whether their child passed the Check**

The majority of parents in each group felt that the Check should be discontinued, with the highest percentage giving this opinion if their child had failed the Check. There is a significant relationship between whether the child passed the Check and parental attitude to the Screening Check:  $\chi^2=16.85$ ,  $df=6$ ,  $p=.01$ , Cramer's  $V=.168$ .

**7. Relationships between parental attitude to the future of the Screening Check and whether the Check affected their child.**

The greatest percentage in each group thinks that the Screening Check should be discontinued. This view was most prevalent amongst parents whose child had been affected by the Check. There is a significant relationship between whether the child was affected by the Check and parental attitude to the future of the Screening Check:  $\chi^2=28.788$ ,  $df=6$ ,  $p<.0005$ , Cramer's  $V=.220$ .

**8. Relationships between the child's reading ability at the time of the Check and whether they passed the Screening Check**

The majority of children who were reading with understanding at the time of the Check passed the Check, whereas those who could read a few words stood an equal chance of passing or failing. Children who knew a few or most letters were more likely to fail the check. There is a significant relationship between the child's reading ability and whether they passed the Screening Check:  $\chi^2=85.873$ ,  $df=8$ ,  $p<.0005$ , Cramer's  $V=.376$ .

**Conclusions**

Parents are more likely to disagree with the Screening Check and government policy on teaching reading if their child has been affected by the Check, does not enjoy reading, has failed the Check or could not read well at the time of the Check. In itself, this is not surprising: feeling that your child is failing at the beginning of their school career must be very hard for parents to manage, particularly if their child is also distressed.

What is surprising is that so many of the parents whose children were reading well, enjoyed reading, or who had passed the Check still express negative attitudes towards the policy and the Check.

There is also a very strong significant association between the child's reading ability at the time of the Check and whether they passed the Check. If children are more likely to pass if they are reading fluently with understanding, but stand an equal chance of passing or failing if they are reading a few words, then it is hard surely to claim that it is really measuring decoding skills? If it was, then surely most of the children who know most of their letters should be passing it in Year 1?